VIOLET
19세 미만 구독 불가
쿠유 장편소설
터닝
Turning
251-500

Turning ( ) by Kuyu ( ). Volume 2 (Chapter 250-500)

Yuder was a commoner Omega who rose to the top with his ability.

When he woke up again after being falsely accused and executed, he was back 11 years ago before everything began.

A chance to get back…

He must not repeat the same mistake he did before.

To survive, and to save the world, now he had to save the man he had killed!

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Chapter 251

“I appreciate your offer… Can I have a moment to think it over?”

Gakane couldn’t outrightly reject the mages’ goodwill, nor was it his place to independently make a decision about such a critical matter. He slightly bowed his head, his face displaying polite consideration. Kishiar gave a small nod, seemingly applauding his judiciousness.

“Yes, of course. It’s not like we’re expecting to leave immediately. Please consult with the others and then give us your answer. We will step outside for a while.”

One by one, the mages exited the room, allowing the Cavalry members to freely discuss amongst themselves. Just before Lorna, the last one to leave, could step out, Yuder approached her and spoke softly, lowering his voice.

“May I ask you something quickly?”

“Oh, yes. What is it?”

Lorna seemed surprised, blinking in response to Yuder, who had been silent up till now, initiating the conversation.

“I recalled hearing about the Western Mage Union from another mage I knew when you mentioned it. Might I know the name of your leader who is here…?”

“Ah… It’s Micalin Punt. Despite being recommended for a senior position in the Pearl Tower, he chose to stay with this secluded union, prioritizing his research. He is a great mage.”

Perhaps Yuder’s mentioning of having heard about them previously sparked some goodwill, for Lorna’s expression noticeably softened.

‘As I thought.’

Ever since they introduced themselves as the Western Mage Union and mentioned their leader, Yuder had been vaguely recalling a letter given to him by Thais Yulman. Now that he had heard the name Micalin, he was certain. These were the very people Thais Yulman had mentioned.

‘I didn’t expect to encounter them so soon. I thought I wouldn’t meet them until at least the second dispatch troop arrived, and we’d officially started the subjugation.’

Though unexpected, an early meeting wasn’t a bad thing. Especially in these circumstances. He narrowed his eyes slightly before breaking into a smile.

“…Yes, hearing the name has jogged my memory. The person who told me about him also said he was a great man.”

“Did they?”

Yuder replied cheerfully, unaware that his unexpected smile had melted the last wall in the mage’s heart, a woman who seemed to know nothing of the word ‘smile’.

“It seems like fate that we would meet in such a place. Thank you for your answer.”

“Not at all. We should… see you later.”

With an unexpectedly gentle demeanor, a stark contrast to their initial encounter, Lorna exited the room and closed the door. As the loud voices and rustling of the mages gradually distanced, the

Cavalry members, who had been maintaining silence, collectively released their pent-up breaths.

“Phew.”

“Yuder, what did you ask her?”

Kanna, who had been standing next to Yuder, took off her crumpled hat and asked.

“The name of the Western Mage Union’s leader.”

“Why?”

“Before we came here, Mr. Yulman wrote a letter to him.”

After replying succinctly, Yuder turned towards Kishiar.

“Commander, what do you think about their proposal just now?”

Considering the Pelleta knights and Ejain’s attendants who were following at a distance, the prospect of joining with the mages could be troublesome. However, it was also true that their familiarity with the geography would likely ensure Ejain’s safety during their journey.

Regardless of the decision, Yuder planned to meet Micalin Punt and deliver the letter given by Thais Yulman. Whether this would occur before or after Ejain’s departure, depended on Kishiar’s decision, so he asked.

However, Kishiar, as usual, did not answer straight away. He silently gazed at him. Despite his eyes being obscured by the cloth that hung down to his nose, the sensation of his gaze was surprisingly clear.

“…Commander?”

Upon calling him again, Kishiar finally turned his head slightly towards the other members.

“Well, it seems both options have their merits. Any opinions?”

“I will follow the Commander’s opinion.”

“Me too.”

All members except Yuder and Priest Lusan said they would follow Kishiar’s words. Even Prince Ejain, after a moment’s silence and consideration, answered, “I think it would be alright to go with the mages.”

“To meet those who entered the Great Sarain Forest to accompany me, we must travel the trade route inside the forest leading to Hisnu. It seems to me, aiming for safety at least until the halfway point would make things more comfortable for everyone.”

“I see. Then Yuder, what’s your opinion?”

Turning back towards Yuder, Kishiar appeared calm and relaxed as usual. Comforted, Yuder voiced the argument he had wanted to make since earlier.

“I believe it would certainly be advantageous for us to accompany the mages.”

“Certainty, not an opinion. Why?”

“Because of this letter.”

Yuder took out the letter given by Thais Yulman from his pocket and briefly showed it.

“It is a letter of introduction given by Yulman out of worry for our first external mission as the Cavalry. He wrote it to Micalin Punt, the

leader of the Western Mage Union, who is said to be here. They've been acquainted for some time."

Their team, being the first dispatched group, had to join the second team as soon as they completed escorting Prince Ejain. To carry out the subsequent mission successfully, a cooperative relationship with the established powers in the West was essential.

Building a relationship with the Western Mage Union would be a good start.

"…I see. The sooner we build a bridge of cooperation for the future, the better."

Kishiar's voice lightened, as if he immediately grasped Yuder's intention.

"Alright. Let's do that, and as soon as we step out, we need to make sure they understand that we are the Cavalry."

"How should we address Commander and the Prince?"

At Yuder's question, Kishiar paused in thought.

"For the sake of the mission's security, it's better to keep both identities secret. Once we disclose we are the Cavalry, Kanna Wand and Yuder Aile will take on the role of the representative."

"Understood."

Gakane, finally released from his representative role, seemed relieved and his complexion brightened. In contrast, Kanna seemed to feel the pressure, tightly closing her lips, but she knew this was one of the things she had to get used to as the Deputy Commander.

They had made their decision and stepped out of the room. The clamorous voices of the mages resounded from the area they had

initially entered, filtering through without obstruction.

“…So that’s what Master Micalin said. We should leave a few people here to monitor and report as soon as that Cavalry or whatever they are comes here, serving also as caregivers in rotation…”

“No matter how many times I think about it, I really don’t understand. How can the Awakeners have nothing to prey on but what others have been working on for years? Do they even know what it is…”

Suddenly, as if by agreement, the entire party came to a halt. Questions and confusion lingered in the eyes meeting each other.

“What is this all about?”

A moment later, Hinn Eldore murmured with a chill.

“Did I hear wrong? Something about Cavalry.”

“It doesn’t seem like we misheard. I heard it too.”

After Gakane responded, silence once again shrouded the group. Yuder noticed Kishiar’s lips, hidden under his hat, curling upwards into a discernible smirk.

“We should probably find out what’s going on before revealing our identities.”

They entered the place where the mages were. Seeing the faces of the welcome guests, the mages greeted them with bright faces.

“Have you made a decision?”

“Yes. But just before we came in, it seemed like you were in the middle of an unusual conversation…”

As Yuder trailed off and looked at the mages, they all stiffened, looking startled.

“Oh, you heard that? Don’t worry too much about it.”

“It’s a story that has nothing to do with you. It’s about some vee-ery nasty people who are targeting us.”

“Yes, because it’s related to what we’re studying.”

‘Sorry, but it seems like those vee-ery nasty people are us standing right in front of you.’ Yuder swallowed a response he couldn’t give and slowly asked again.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand how it’s related to your research subject. What does your research subject have to do with the Awakener group, the Cavalry?”

“Huh? You know about the Cavalry as well. Ah, it makes sense. They’ve been quite notorious recently… That’s the thing…”

“Hmm. How should I say it? Is it a problem of appropriateness?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then what? Cut-ins?”

Amidst the sudden clamor of the mages, Lorna Beit, the only one Yuder recognized by name, stood up and let out a large sigh.

“That has a lot to do with why our leader came here, as I mentioned earlier. I didn’t mention it because I thought it wouldn’t be related to the current situation in Great Sarain Forest…”

Unaware of their true identities standing in front of her, she proceeded to explain briefly.

The incident in which Baron Willhem refused the assistance of the Western Mage Union and announced that he would cooperate with the newly requested Cavalry, credible rumors that the Cavalry showed great interest in the research subjects of the mages located in Great Sarain Forest, and the incident where the leader Micalin, who had devoted his life to research for many years, rushed to Great Sarain Forest in rage like a wildfire. As this all unfolded rapidly, the members of the Cavalry couldn't keep their mouths shut.

"…So, our leader currently refuses to leave Great Sarain Forest and has instructed us to instead track and collect information about the Cavalry on his behalf. Of course, it's not me but a few colleagues who will stay here who should do it."

"…I see."

It was too absurd to comprehend what response would be appropriate. Yuder pondered if anything similar had happened in his past life and concluded that it might have been possible. If the tension between Baron Willhem and the Western Mage Union still existed much later than the present time, such a scenario could have occurred.

'It's strange how their attitude changed when the Cavalry was mentioned, and it's led to this.'

"Have you considered that those rumors might be false?"

"Hmm… It could be, but without the Cavalry clarifying it personally, do we have to think so positively about them from the start? We've also done our fair share of investigations and it's true that the Tain household requested their assistance."

Lorna replied with a crinkle of her nose.

'So, they know we've been asked to help, but it seems they're not aware we decided to operate independently after rejecting it.'

The misunderstanding was serious. Yuder felt an urgent need to rectify this situation before it became irreversible, so he threw another question.

“Even so, how would the Cavalry know about and be interested in what the Western Mage Union is researching?”

“Baron Willhem and the Tain family must have told them. They are aware of the Magic Spring Ruins, after all.”

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Chapter 252

The Magic Spring Ruins. Yuder mulled over the unfamiliar name for a moment, then quietly recalled his memories.

‘What were they researching? Were there such ruins in the Great Sarain Forest?’

The Great Sarain Forest, known for its mysterious vitality, had long been believed by many to be a place where ancient treasures could surface if one were to dig beneath it. Countless individuals, too many to name, had wasted their lives excavating near the Great Sarain Forest, dedicating their existence to the pursuit, and would likely continue to do so in the future. Yet, as far as Yuder knew, no one had ever truly found anything of substantial value.

‘I don’t recall hearing about mages conducting research there after the Western Monster Suppression… and the collapse of the Pearl Tower… Hmm.’

Perhaps their research had ended with the Western Monster Suppression in his past life? Yuder thought and then glanced at Kishiar. As if waiting for that very moment, he opened his mouth to pose a question to Lorna.

“I’m not familiar with these ruins, but the name ‘Magic Spring’ seems rather familiar. Did you perhaps take the name from the legend of the Magic Spring related to the Archmage Luma?”

“It was indeed derived from that, but that’s not all there is to it.”

Lorna’s eyes suddenly sparkled, perhaps because the topic was related to her research.

“Our Western Mage Union believes that these ruins might indeed be the Magic Spring. You probably wouldn’t understand how monumental this is for us mages.”

“…Hmm. I see.”

Yuder’s reaction seemed quite cool, causing another mage to clench his fist and raise his voice.

“Of course, many claim it’s a wild fantasy. Baron Willhem and even our headquarters at the Pearl Tower have expressed skepticism about the years-long, large-scale research without any significant findings. But this year, something will definitely emerge! It’s a critical time.”

With that, the surrounding mages began to chime in one by one.

“That’s right. I truly have a feeling about this year! The magic energy levels in that land have changed so drastically, there can’t possibly be nothing there.”

“We can’t let those who are showing interest now snatch it away from us!”

The more he heard, the less reason Yuder could see for the Cavalry to be interested in their ruins, yet they seemed fiercely antagonistic, for reasons unclear.

‘Even if it’s a time when little is known about the Awakener, they should know that the power of the Awakener and the magic used by mages are entirely different.’

While Yuder was wondering whether it was time to reveal that they were Cavalry, Kanna quietly asked Kishiar in a low voice.

“Um, what is this legend of the Magic Spring?”

“It’s part of a legend about the magic revolution. A thousand years ago, the first mages, including Archmage Luma, are said to have drunk from the Magic Spring and awakened their magic power for the first time.”

“I see… So they’re excavating because they think that it might still be there in the Great Sarain Forest?”

“It seems so.”

“But why… Why would we be interested in such a place? It doesn’t make sense.”

Kanna’s expression became even more peculiar. The other Cavalry members also seemed to have complicated feelings about being embroiled in such a wild legend and earning the mages’ resentment.

And then, as if shattering their thoughts, Kishiar murmured softly.

“Is that really the case?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do not simply think of them as absurd. Consider the legends I’ve told you along with their words. Does it not sound like a familiar tale?”

‘Familiar…? What do… Ah.’

Could it be?

A faint voice from behind caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end. Yuder turned his gaze towards the mages, who were still fervently arguing with each other, and quickly racked his brain.

‘The Magic Spring that supposedly granted magical abilities to the initial mages. And the Red Stone that empowered the Awakener. Is their unusual caution towards the Awakener and their anger at mere interest in their research due to linking these two?’

“The Red Stone and the Magic Spring… Is that it?”

Whether the quiet whisper that slipped from Yuder’s lips was heard or not, a short laugh like the sound of wind followed from behind. That small reaction, exactly the same satisfied laugh often shown when Yuder smoothly understood Kishiar’s intent, was more decisive than any other response.

‘Previously, Alik had said he did not know whether Luma’s magical revolution was real or not.’

Yuder recalled a part of the old story he had once shared with Priest Lusan when Alik, the apprentice of Thais Yulman, had just Awakened. At that time, he had discussed the magical revolution of Luma, saying neither Thais nor himself believed it to be real.

According to this story, Alik and the Western Mage Union would have different views on the magical revolution.

‘If the Magic Spring really existed and they found it, my previous life would surely have known.’

However, that had not happened. Therefore, one might conclude that the research of the Western Mage Union either failed or was abandoned. Yet, the idea of linking the legend related to the origin of magic which began in ancient times to the Red Stone was surprisingly novel, something he had never thought of before.

‘So there were mages who considered the origins of magic and the Awakener to have started in the same way….’

It was said that the Western Mage Union, unable to produce research results for several years, were now viewed skeptically by the Pearl Tower. However, thinking conversely, it also implied that at the inception of their research, the Pearl Tower had seen some potential there.

What potential had they seen in those ruins?

While observing the mages with these thoughts, Lorna's conversation with the other mages caught Yuder's attention.

"So, when we arrive at the base, we need to help restore the defense line first. While restoring, we may have to alternate on guard duty, but that level of risk is something we must bear…"

Despite the recent near-death encounter with monsters, there wasn't a hint of fear in the eyes of any of the mages. They were filled with an urgent desire to return and continue their research.

'… Would those who don't even fear death have so easily believed their research failed and retreated?'

Could the fact that he knew nothing about them, even during the extermination of the monsters in the West, and even after he took the Commander position, simply be because their research had failed?

When the Pearl Tower collapsed, many of its mages went missing and a significant amount of research data was lost. However, there was something unsettling about attributing everything about them to that event alone.

"Mages… those mages who were in the west during this period… did we have a chance to clash with those affiliated to that region while we were on our suppression mission? I can't remember well…"

As he speculated about the source of this discomfort, observing their postures, a snippet of a long-forgotten memory and thought suddenly surged in Yuder's mind.

'…Could this be related to the incidents that occurred in the western border area before the dispatch of the Cavalry in my previous life?'

In his previous life, the Cavalry was dispatched to the west a few months from now, and due to the delayed response, the situation was already dire. There were a few severe incidents reported almost daily until their deployment, among which some involved the death of mages that were serious enough to be mentioned by Kishiar, if his memory served right.

Yuder tried to recall as much of the dim memory as he could.

'Was it the incident where several border villages were wiped out due to a presumed mass monster outbreak?'

Although there had been numerous villages that had nearly been destroyed due to monsters, what set this incident apart was the significant number of individuals who appeared to be mages among the victims. He recalled Kishiar's cold judgment, that the uproar over who was to blame only served to worsen the already chaotic western situation.

'Not long after that, the Cavalry was dispatched…'

By the time the Cavalry, including Yuder, had arrived in the west, the incident had long been resolved. If those who died back then were mages from the Western Mage Union, it would make sense why Yuder didn't know about them and why their research had been forgotten and lost.

'…'

While it was just speculation, the possibility was indeed there. Suddenly, the faces of the mages who were chattering in front of him started to seem as pale as those of the dead. Suppressing the chill in his stomach, Yuder opened his mouth.

“Excuse me… Can I continue speaking now?”

“Oh yes. I’m sorry… we got carried away with our conversation. Please continue.”

Lorna, the absentminded mage, finally noticed the presence of the guests standing before her and apologized as she responded. Yuder glanced at the mages’ friendly faces and slowly asked a question.

“If, as you said earlier, the Cavalry appeared before you to clarify the misunderstanding, what would you do? If they claimed that they had no interest in the research of the Western Mage Union and had no connection to Baron Willhem or the Tain family, would you believe them?”

“Why would you say that?”

Sensing something unusual in Yuder’s voice, Lorna furrowed her brows. Her gaze swept over Yuder’s face anew.

“Didn’t you say you were knights and mercenaries?”

“We were dispatched for a mission and couldn’t reveal our identities right away. But we don’t want our misunderstanding to deepen, so we decided to tell the truth here.”

After taking a deep breath, Yuder revealed their identities to the mages, who were staring at him with shocked faces.

“We are the Cavalry you’ve mentioned.”

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Chapter 253

“We are that Cavalry.”

In the silence that filled the space, countless emotions swirled with each carrying its own shock. Yuder turned his head slightly, giving a brief glance at Kishiar’s expression. He had completely understood the misunderstanding the mages were having, and given there seemed to be no prior or future circumstances worth investigating, he thought this to be the appropriate moment to reveal their identities, as Kishiar had originally instructed. Yet, he was not entirely certain.

From beneath his lowered hat, Kishiar, who was looking at Yuder, smiled and subtly nodded as soon as their eyes met. It felt as if Kishiar, from his smooth demeanor, also deemed this to be the right moment to step forward, as if he knew what Yuder was thinking. Yuder turned his head away from those captivating lips he found oddly hard to look away from, and faced the mages again.

“…Ar-are you really claiming you’re the Cavalry?”

Lorna, who seemed to have somewhat calmed down from the initial shock, managed to ask after a while.

“Does that mean you knew who we were from the start and approached us…?”

“Why would that be? It was purely a coincidence.”

Although they had suspected they were mages based on their attire from the first time they saw them, the assistance they had offered was not calculated. The capability and warmth Priest Lusan showed left no room for doubt, a fact that even the mages seemed unable to refute, as they remained silent.

“We didn’t even know until a moment ago that you all were under such a misconception about the Cavalry. If we hadn’t been trying to learn about the situation in the Great Sarain Forest, we would have simply assisted you and immediately gone our separate ways.”

“…”

The mages’ eyes wavered. They wanted to think it was a lie, but there was not the slightest indication of deception in Yuder’s calm demeanor.

‘Are they really that… Cavalry?’

Everything about them differed from the Cavalry the mages had vaguely imagined up to now. Even the party standing behind Yuder, who must have heard the insults directed at the Cavalry, confused them by not showing any anger.

They had thought the party, looking uniquely diverse, was peculiar, but the reason they didn’t question too much when they claimed to be a knight order and mercenaries was because they seemed well-mannered and discerning. Not a single one among them matched the existing rumors of the Cavalry, reputedly comprised mostly of peasants and infamous for their uncouth behavior.

“I-I can’t believe it. How can I believe you all are the Cavalry?”

“Would you believe us if we did this?”

Yuder raised a single finger towards a mage who sharply retorted. A moment later, a thin stream of fire and water intertwined in a spiral, shooting upwards from his hand. Several mages gasped, swallowing hard at the sight.

“No… Two elements at the same time…?”

“God. Without any preparation… and so young…”

The sight of him using two elements so effortlessly was practically irrefutable evidence of Yuder being an Awakener. The mages no longer demanded proof. In the place where their recent display of goodwill had partially subsided, a mixture of caution, disappointment, and envy began to fill the room.

Yuder withdrew his power and turned to Lorna, who wore a complex expression, and began to speak.

“The reason I reveal this so openly is because we do not wish to add a new misunderstanding—that we deceived you—to the unnecessary confusion we’ve already created. You offered your kind proposition earlier to accompany us to the stronghold within the Great Sarain Forest… Is that offer still valid?”

The mages around Lorna glanced at each other. A hesitation on what to do next was palpable. Lorna herself seemed to struggle to answer immediately, maintaining a silence before asking a counter-question.

“Really… If you are the Cavalry, and this is all our misunderstanding, then why on earth have you come all the way here?”

“As we’ve mentioned, it’s because of a mission.”

“What kind of mission?”

“We can’t go into the details, but…”

“It’s related to monster subjugation!”

Kanna interrupted Yuder, who was about to answer vaguely about the secret mission.

‘…Kanna?’

Kanna blinked shortly at Yuder and waggled her finger slightly. It was challenging to understand exactly what she intended, but glancing at an empty chair she was lightly touching, he made a rough guess.

‘She must have figured something out in the meantime.’

If she inferred information, then her answer would be correct. After all, it wasn’t incorrect. Yuder decided to go along with Kanna’s statement.

“…Yes, she’s right. It’s a preliminary investigation related to monster subjugation.”

“So, it has something to do with Baron Willhem from the Tain Family…”

“Although we did receive a request for assistance from the Tain Family, the Cavalry officially declined it.”

“Huh? But you just said you came here for a mission related to monster subjugation.”

“We’ve determined there is a need to fully understand and assist with the unusual situation in the West, unrelated to the Tain Family.”

After saying so, Yuder took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. To rectify the Cavalry’s reputation with these skeptical mages, he needed to act more confidently than anyone else.

“The Cavalry only serves the Empire; it’s not a place that moves for the interests of a single family.”

The mages facing him involuntarily gulped. Initially, they thought this young man, who was less noticeable than his flamboyant colleague, was quite average. But now, they found themselves unable to take their eyes off him. What on earth could they think of the enormous pride and aura emanating from him?

His pale face and dark eyes pulled people in like the unfathomable night sky. They were unaware of the fact that behind the strange fear touching the bottom of their hearts, there was something akin to fascination.

‘What is this feeling… as if I’m dealing with a leader…’

‘I only thought he looked a bit gloomy… Did he always have that face?’

‘Just how old is he? He can’t be that young, can he? Or…’

While each was lost in thought, Lorna managed to regain her composure and finally shook her head and spoke.

“…Alright. I understand what you’re saying.”

“Does that mean you trust us?”

“It’s not as if we can verify the truth right here and now.”

“Lorna!”

“If the Cavalry really ventured out for the extermination, disregarding the concerns of others and acting solely for the Empire, then we would have no reason to confront them here and now.”

Lorna quickly responded to her comrade mage’s anxious voice.

“If the monster incident that occurred today were to end today, that would be one thing. But we all anticipated that it would be difficult for us alone to tackle the Great Sarain Forest this year. And

one way or another, the fact remains that they've provided us with substantial help."

"Well…"

"I find it hard to believe everything at once, too. However, as a mage, we've learned to think rationally based on the phenomena that occur, so that's what I'm trying to do."

"Right. But still…"

Contrasting emotions filled the mages' faces. The conflict was evident as they grappled between the reality of the non-hostile Cavalry before them and their past perception of the detested imaginary Cavalry.

Just as their minds were in turmoil, Kishiar's voice softly echoed from behind Yuder, as if he was waiting for this very moment.

"It seems you're troubled by the proposition of joining us in the forest. If our misunderstanding can be cleared, that alone would be enough, so you don't need to stick to that proposal. It's a wise decision for the group to avoid the risks and retreat."

"What… what are you saying? Are you suggesting that we, who made the initial proposal, are trying to run away out of fear?"

"We were not contemplating for such reasons!"

Those who felt directly targeted immediately rebutted. The other mages, who had been contemplating, suddenly realized that retreating from here would mean they would be seen as denigrating their benefactors and even rejecting their own proposal, and their expressions became strange.

'Indeed, there's none better than him at changing the atmosphere with just a word… Now, I suppose it's time to bring this out.'

Yuder, secretly admiring, took out the final tool to secure the mages' decision from his pocket.

"As you heard, it's fine if we don't go together. However, would you be able to deliver this letter to your leader, Micalin Punt?"

"What is that?"

Lorna asked, looking at the letter in Yuder's hand.

"It's a letter from the mage who told me about the Western Mage Union and your leader. He asked me to deliver it."

"A mage who told you about us? What are you talking about, Lorna?"

"Did we have a mage who was friendly with the Cavalry?"

Behind Lorna, the mages murmured, but Lorna did not answer easily.

"I intended to give it to your leader when we meet directly… But given the circumstances, delivering it should be enough."

"How do we know if that's true?"

"If you're suspicious, you can confirm it for yourself."

Yuder handed the letter to Lorna. Seeing the name of Thais Yulman written on the surface of the introduction letter, Lorna's eyes widened.

"Thais Yulman… you can't mean one of the Elders of the Pearl Tower, Thais Yulman?"

"What? Thais Yulman?"

“Thais Yulman, the one who was said to have no equal in the field of research on the nature of magic?”

The mages crowded behind Lorna en masse, examining the name written on the surface of the letter. As Lorna opened the letter moments later, the eyes of many converged on her hands.

“This is…”

Silence fell.

It was an undeniable genuine letter. Moreover, anticipating a day like today when the letter might fail to reach Micalin due to the doubts of other mages, Yulman had left numerous traces that only the mages of the Pearl Tower could recognize.

The Cavalry members holding this letter were credible individuals who had provided significant help in his research, and they had embarked on the monster extermination mission with pure intentions. From his request for cooperation and mutual help, the mages read the disguised language of an Elder’s veiled threat, which wasn’t exactly a threat.

“So, our leader was a junior to a master like him.”

“He is receiving help in his research… What exactly is he researching?”

“He would be terribly upset if the extermination mission drags on and causes problems…?”

Being mages themselves, they understood better than anyone the sentiment of not wishing for problems to occur in their research subjects. The young mages silently stared at the Cavalry members, and at Yuder’s face, in front of the intimidating letter disguised as a letter of introduction from a senior and daunting Elder.

“…What on earth are you guys…”

There was no one left who had anything more to argue with the Cavalry. They began packing their belongings without a word, moving briskly and efficiently.

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Chapter 254

“Nathan! Is that the sign left by the Duke this time?”

Upon hearing the Peletta Knight’s question, Nathan Zuckerman lifted his eyes, silently nodding as he folded the piece of paper he held in his hand.

“Yes.”

“And there are no peculiarities again?”

“He advises us to follow at a slower pace.”

“A slower pace?”

A knight with a grim scar on his face scratched his cheek, lost in thought.

“Is he intending to delay our rendezvous? I hope there hasn’t been an incident.”

“…”

Instead of answering his question, Nathan placed the folded note in his mouth and swallowed it.

“Ah, of course. If that were the case, you wouldn’t be this calm. Haha. I worry too much.”

Even though Nathan did not laugh in return, making his demeanor feel rather bleak, the knight, accustomed to his ways, did not take it to heart.

“What is the condition of those in the wagon?”

After disposing of the note completely, Nathan asked, and the knight turned his head to glance at the shabby wagon parked behind them. Although it seemed quiet as if no one was aboard, inside were two attendants of Prince Ejain.

“Same as ever. Neither fighting nor conversing… Utterly silent. It’s as if they’ve given up completely.”

“Even so, we must remain vigilant. They could change their demeanor and attempt to escape at any moment. Especially as we are about to enter the Great Sarain Forest.”

“I know. But they surely can’t be stronger than you, Nathan.”

The knight, aware of Nathan Zuckerman being a hidden swordmaster, chuckled and patted his shoulder.

“But Nathan, are you not at all worried about entrusting the Duke to those of the Cavalry alone?”

Nathan, pushing off the hand on his shoulder, slightly furrowed his brow and looked at the knight. Noticing the cold demeanor in Nathan’s gaze, the knight quickly lowered his head as if to say he did not doubt his intentions.

“No, it’s not that I doubt the Duke’s judgment. If the Duke has decided so, then it’s undoubtedly the right decision. I merely worry whether these unknown individuals will truly be able to serve him well.”

‘Serve.’

A single word from the knight suddenly sprang up in Nathan Zuckerman’s mind. Although now a significant power within the Peletta Knights and a freeman, there was a time when he was more accustomed to a life serving at the lowest ranks, cleaning someone’s

shoes. Therefore, he understood better than most what a multitude of meanings could be included in the word ‘serve’.

Kishiar was a complex individual who, due to his unique circumstances and secrets, put a complex and thick wall around himself, independent of trusting those around him. There were only a few, including Nathan, to whom he showed even a glimpse of his true feelings.

To him, both the Peletta Knights and the Cavalry members were all just figures of similar weight. He wouldn’t differentiate between who was more familiar or comfortable.

‘Except for one.’

In Nathan Zuckerman’s mind, the image of a man with dark hair and a pale face surfaced. A peculiar man, quiet and cold like an unlit dawn, yet at times, his gaze weathered like that of a veteran who’d crossed the threshold of life and death countless times. It was Yuder Aile.

Kishiar’s attitude towards Yuder Aile was somewhat special. So special that, at times, even Nathan found it difficult to grasp his lord’s thoughts. At least, Nathan had never seen him show such long and persistent attention toward anyone before.

Nathan could not understand what kind of emotion his lord was feeling towards him, but he was certain of one thing from his observations so far.

There was an odd resemblance between the two. It was hard to explain what exactly was similar. Although they were completely different in appearance, personality, status, life trajectories, and even age, Nathan felt there was a fundamental commonality between them. Who would understand this, though? Even Nathan sometimes found it difficult to understand why he felt this way. However, the

weight of this intuition occasionally thumped against his chest so heavily that he could not dismiss it as a mere illusion.

‘Yes, for instance….’

What if there was a being who could give the same answer as him, even when they were scattered on different paths? A being that could reach the same conclusion, despite having different beginnings and processes. A powerful sense of homogeneity only those who have walked the same path for a long time could feel, or perhaps something even stronger. The ‘resemblance’ Nathan felt for them was close to that.

Nathan guessed that Kishiar’s deep interest in Yuder Aile, and the reason he enjoyed his company so genuinely, was perhaps because he had realized this.

In that sense, wasn’t Yuder Aile the most fitting being to serve their lord?

Other Peletta Knights might not understand what this meant, but to Nathan, who had served Kishiar since childhood, the meaning was very different.

“It’s not our concern. As long as one person is there, it’s enough.”

“One person? Who is it?”

The knight asked curiously, but Nathan turned his head without answering.

“What, you can’t tell? Who is it, really?”

“…The backup team in charge of cleaning up the safehouse is coming. The atmosphere doesn’t look normal, get ready.”

“Huh?”

When the knight turned his head in surprise, something that looked like a dust cloud from a distance too far for the naked eye to see well caught his eye. Shortly after, their companions who had run up in a flash, gasping for breath, jumped off in front of Nathan.

“Nathan, there were intruders in the safehouse.”

“Intruders?”

“Yeah, they weren’t ordinary skilled ones. There were five of them, two fought us as soon as they entered, and the other three searched the interior without hesitation, dug up the body of the servant buried in the backyard, and just left.”

“What are you talking about? They dug up the body and left?”

When the knight with the scar on his side asked in surprise, the exhausted knight thought, ‘That’s what I said,’ and then replied briefly.

“Looks like they had attached a tracking tool to the dead guy. They seemed to have just recovered that and disappeared… I couldn’t confirm what it was, where they went, they disappeared too quickly. I’m sorry.”

Upon hearing the knight’s report, Nathan’s eyes narrowed sharply.

“…Tool? Weren’t all the belongings on the body checked when it was buried?”

“I’ve confirmed it. There was nothing suspicious. Not even a trace of magic artifacts.”

The knight with the scarred face frowned, shaking his head. Lost in thought for a moment, Nathan quickly came to a conclusion.

“Then they must have used another method. We’ll have to check.”

“To whom?”

“If the target is the prince of Nelarn, we’ll have to ask those who have come from there. So, what’s the situation with our injured?”

The newly arrived knights looked at each other’s faces and cautiously reported to Nathan, who was immediately checking the next situation.

“Beddy and Jean were slightly injured by a sword. The others are still fine.”

“I see. Those who are injured should get treatment right away.”

“Understood.”

Nathan immediately led the remaining knights toward the carriage. As he swiftly swung the door open, the two servants, their eyes wide with alarm, met his gaze.

“New assassins who followed the trail of your deceased colleague were found in the safehouse they had left. It seems like they used a tool we can’t predict for tracking, then took it back. You might know better about such methods. Any ideas?”

“What, what are you talking about? Assassins following the dead Faity…”

“…They might have been carrying a tool with a special scent that only trained individuals can detect.”

While the servant named Jenn was shocked and questioning, Melbon quickly responded with a pale face.

“The mother of the Third Prince, the greatest enemy of the Prince, is from the land of Aeril. I’ve heard that assassins from there possess such technology.”

“A tool with a special scent… could it trace even a buried body?”

“They say it takes several days for the scent once buried to disappear, so it might be possible.”

“If they left the safehouse directly, it can be assumed that they left to track the Second Prince. Is there a chance that such a tool could be attached to the Second Prince?”

“…There is.”

After a moment’s grimace of thought, Melbon swallowed hard and widened his eyes.

“There is one thing. A gift that Faity gave to the Prince a few days ago…”

“What is it?”

“A hairband. The prince has a hairband that he always carries with him, a relic from the deceased second queen. He lost it while packing in haste to leave the Empire, and a few days later, Faity returned it, claiming it was mixed in his luggage. This happened just recently.”

“I remember that too.”

Jenn murmured.

“But Faity, he wouldn’t go that far…”

“Well. You went that far, so it’s not impossible for Faity.”

“What, what did you say, Melbon? You are also…”

“Quiet.”

The two servants shivered and closed their mouths at the sharp aura exuded by the Swordmaster, Nathan Zuckerman. Nathan closed the carriage door, turned around, and briefly summarized the situation to the Peletta Knights.

“The situation has become serious, so we’ll abandon the previous instructions and move immediately along the fastest route. I’ll send a messenger right now, the rest of you prepare.”

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Chapter 255

At Nathan’s command, the Peletta Knights silently, yet quickly, nodded and commenced to move, vacating their posts with startling efficiency. From within the carriage, the two servants, who had been eavesdropping, failed to hide their mixed emotions and met each other’s gaze.

“Assassins from Aeril… The Third Prince seems intent on assassinating Prince Ejain entirely. What in the world will become of me?”

“You’re worried about your safety after betraying us, Jenn?”

“Am I not allowed to worry about myself? Dammit. Whether the Prince returns to Nelarn or not, I need to return to my family.”

“If you die, consider it paying for your sins. Betrayal from someone who’s afraid of that… interesting.”

“What was that, aren’t you a spy from Durban? Are you really in a position to say that? You’re the one who betrayed the Prince most out of all of us…!”

“And that’s why I’m calmly waiting for death. What’s your problem?”

Jenn, enraged by Melbon’s cold, sarcastic comment, breathed heavily with fury. This was the first conversation they had had since being confined in the carriage, and there was no warmth between them befitting allies.

“I’ve always disliked you, Melbon. Always acting as if you were the only one serving the Prince… Who would have guessed you were so deceitful? If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be in this situation!”

At that moment, sensing the rising tension inside, someone outside knocked on the carriage door. The two servants immediately fell silent, but Jenn's eyes were still full of determination, desperately searching for a way to survive.

'I've been wronged. My crime, even when revealed, is not so grave to warrant death. Wait for death quietly? No, I can't die unjustly like this. Judging by the situation, it seems unlikely that Prince Ejain will set foot on Nelarn's land, so I must seize any opportunity to escape this place.'

While harboring their individual thoughts, the carriage sped on, much faster than before.

–-

From the moment they crossed the boundary of the Great Sarain Forest, everyone felt a change in the air. Wading through the dense undergrowth, where even a path for a single person was barely visible, was more exhausting than anticipated.

The thickly intertwined trees and bushes, enough to block out the sky, were a significant obstacle. Even more problematic was the thick, concentrated scent of vegetation that filled their lungs with each breath.

The scent of a forest that hadn't been maintained for nearly a thousand years was like a swamp composed of odors. Yuder, who grew up in a deep forest, the Eldore siblings with their strong natural instincts, and the mages who had been stubbornly researching in this place for years, could ignore it and continue without any particular discomfort. However, for those who were visiting for the first time, even breathing in the forest was a struggle.

"I feel so light-headed… I thought all plant smells were pleasant, but who knew they could be this overpowering…," Kanna mumbled,

clutching the cloth over her nose and mouth as she trailed the mages.

“I feel the same… Even though the mages explained before we came, the reality is worse. It would have been a little better if we could ride horses.” Gakane sighed in agreement with her.

No matter how used to the Misty Wind Horse they were, it was impossible to properly run in the vast Great Sarain Forest, a place too difficult for even a single person to traverse. As they prepared to set off, the look in Gakane’s eyes became somewhat wistful, perhaps missing the horses they had left behind at the inn they originally intended to visit on Kishiar’s order.

“In a situation like this, I’m not sure we can move properly if monsters appear. I feel so dizzy.”

“Try to cover your nose and mouth tighter with the cloth… if you feel too ill, let us know… If I invoke the divine power, you may feel a bit better… ugh.”

Lusan, who was in the worst condition among the group, muttered with a yellowish, sickly face, leaning on a tree and retching. At this, Emun, who had been walking slumped at his side, also began to gag.

“I’m sorry. I’m a Priest, yet if I keep doing this…”

“If you’re feeling weak, you can ride on my shadow. The health of the Priest is the health of us all.”

“No, I can’t impose like that… but I appreciate the offer.”

The bond among comrades indeed strengthened most during hard times. Yuder watched his struggling companions, then moved closer to Kishiar, who was walking silently ahead, his hat pulled low.

“…Are you still okay?”

Calling Kishiar just ‘you’ in a situation where they had agreed not to call him a Commander, in case the mages might hear, felt a bit weirder than usual.

“Whether I am or not, surprisingly, I’m just the same as at the start.”

There was no need to suspect it as a lie. Despite having been in the Great Sarain Forest for quite some time, there was absolutely no change in Kishiar’s stride. As if he had lived in this place since his birth, the man was walking lightly. Under the cloth, he smiled faintly at Yuder and slightly turned his head.

“And you?”

Yuder quickly hid his twitching fingertips by making a fist and lowered his head.

“I’m okay too. As I mentioned earlier, I seem to adapt quickly, maybe because I’ve lived in the mountains.”

“Good to hear. …Actually, on second thought, it’s a bit disappointing.”

It seemed strange that Kishiar would say it was good to hear and then suddenly change his words, but the reason was soon revealed.

“If you were struggling, I could have carried you.”

“…”

In any situation, Kishiar was always Kishiar. His casual demeanor, even more pronounced than usual, made him seem like someone out for a casual stroll. Yuder looked around and was

relieved to find that no one else had heard that audacious statement, then lowered his head again.

“Even if I had struggled with the adjustment, I wouldn’t have imposed on you in such a way.”

“You’ve been in my arms before, so why are you being so shy now, all of a sudden.”

This time it was truly something the others should not hear. Instead of responding to that, Yuder looked around once again, then raised his voice slightly to change the subject.

“…I’m truly relieved that you seem to be fine, as you say. I’ll fall back now. If you feel uncomfortable or sense anything strange, please let me know right away.”

Whether he realized that Yuder was intentionally ignoring him and retreating, Kishiar slightly lifted the corners of his mouth more broadly. Yuder slowed his pace, moved aside from the group, and approached Prince Ejain, who was walking a little distance away.

He was someone Yuder needed to be attentive to, for a completely different reason than Kishiar.

“Are you okay?”

“…I’ve been here before. Thanks to that, I’ve learned how to endure.”

A low voice emerged from beneath a worn hat.

“If you couldn’t bear it, you wouldn’t have chosen to come here in the first place.”

Although the words were comforting, they didn’t provide complete reassurance. Perhaps sensing the careful scrutiny of his own

expression, Ejain broke the silence after a moment.

“Is he alright?”

He was, of course, referring to Kishiar.

“Yes.”

“Truly remarkable. I heard that his health hasn’t been well and he had been staying in the North until he finally showed up in the capital a few years ago… Things are completely different from the rumors.”

The tail end of the voice, laced with a bitter laugh, cracked with dryness. Yuder didn’t know what to respond, and simply continued to move in silence. It seemed Ejain didn’t particularly expect an answer, maintaining his silence as well.

The sound of Lusan retching again came from the front, and the young prince started a conversation again.

“…Does he always lead the way?”

“Pardon?”

“I’m talking about him. You asked me to watch, and I have been. I may not know much, but I’ve noticed that he always takes the front, leaving others behind. I thought it was because he needed to guide the way when riding, but why is he in the most dangerous position now?”

“That’s…”

Yuder turned his head in the direction Ejain was looking at. Just as he had said, Kishiar was always near the front of the group. When Nathan was guiding, Kishiar was just behind him, and since the faithful adjutant disappeared, he had not allowed anyone else to stand in front of him.

Typically, higher-ups preferred safer, middle positions where they could see everything, making Ejain's question a reasonable one.

'But that's if he's not Kishiar.'

Without any explicit order from Kishiar, everyone found their place according to his position. Whether he was in front or behind, the members naturally thought that where he stood was his rightful place.

The way Kishiar had been until now had made them trust his intentions.

"They believe that wherever he stands, he will not be in danger."

"Not in danger? Isn't it your job to protect him? Then you should prevent him from taking dangerous positions."

"Well…"

"Is this another thing I will understand over time, like it's not about following power?"

The belief based on power and the belief from what he'd observed thus far was a little different. As Yuder was hesitating to choose his answer, a sudden commotion erupted from the front. The mages who were far ahead started to shout.

"What's happening?"

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Chapter 256

The two of them stopped talking and looked at each other. Kishiar turned around and immediately issued an order.

“Yuder, follow me. We’re going to check on the mages. Everyone else stays put and protects one another. The majority of you are not yet acclimated. Leave the guarding to the Hinn and Finn Eldore.”

“Understood!”

The mages were within a stone’s throw, close enough to reach with a quick sprint. However, letting one’s guard down in this dense jungle was not an option. Placing Ejain among the group members, Yuder promptly moved toward the mages with Kishiar. Even as Yuder and Kishiar approached, the mages were engaged in a heated argument.

“We should just move on! By the time we finish arguing, we could have been long gone!”

“Are you mad? We should obviously go back!”

“Go back where? In this situation!”

“…What on earth is going on?”

Upon Yuder’s interruption, Lorna turned around and answered with a grimace.

“We discovered something that wasn’t there before we arrived. There’s a tense standoff between those who want to ignore it and move on, and those who want to go back. What do you think? What does it look like to you?”

Yuder followed her pointing finger, but all he saw were the familiar trees they had been seeing thus far. However, squinting slightly and focusing, he realized there was something else amidst them.

Twisted black lines seemed to be haphazardly drawn between the spaces. A strange crevice.

Yuder's eyes widened in surprise.

'That is…'

It looked like a long black shadow formed naturally by overlapping trees. Yet, to Yuder's eyes, a smoky energy appeared to be emanating from the crevice. It looked as though there was a crack in thin air.

'Impossible… But it seems correct. How can that be here?'

While Yuder was reeling in shock, formulating thoughts quickly, Kishiar, who was studying the phenomenon next to him, finally spoke up, addressing the mages.

"A crack in the air… Is there any possibility that this is a sign of a monster emerging?"

"If that were the case, it should have already appeared. We've been watching, but there's been no change."

"You're right to be concerned."

"Thank you for understanding."

The crevice was thin like a line, but it stretched out over a considerable range. Under normal circumstances, they could have taken another path. But now, the uncertainty of where a monster could emerge caused the mages' dilemma. There was a

confrontation between those who did not want to leave the path they perceived as safest and those who thought they should brave the risks and change direction.

Seeing this, Kishiar turned to Yuder, who had been silently observing the crevice.

“You’ve been observing it for a while. Are you surprised?”

“…Yes. A little.”

To others, his face would not have betrayed even a hint of surprise, but it seemed he couldn’t hide it from Kishiar. Yuder readily admitted his astonishment.

“I’ve noticed you often see things differently than others. Do you see something strange?”

“No, it’s not that I see something different…”

As Yuder started to answer but trailed off, Kishiar gently pressed him.

“If there is something concerning, speak freely. Anything will do.”

It was challenging to hide anything before him. Yuder finally averted his gaze from the crack he had been staring at for quite some time. After a long ponder, he barely managed to find the words to describe it.

“To me, that… it appears more than simply ominous. It feels like… the starting point of a disaster.”

Yes, the starting point of a disaster. Yuder thought it a fitting name for the crack that had just left his lips. There was only one thing he could speculate about the nature of the crevice. An event

from the future he never thought he would see again in this ‘present’ timeline. It was a phenomenon related to disaster.

“It sounds quite poetic.”

Kishiar let out a small chuckle, seemingly amused by the abstract metaphor that was quite different from his usual blandness, but Yuder didn’t return the smile. It was not a poetic metaphor, he was speaking the literal truth.

That ominous crack was, in a manner of speaking, a signal.

In his past life, among the disasters that struck the entire continent, phenomena resembling natural calamities often started after such a crack was discovered. Yuder had personally met those who witnessed similar cracks at the starting point of the first recorded earthquake in the soYudern part of the Empire, in the skies above regions that caused abnormal weather, and on the ground just before a massive swarm of monsters poured out. He had even seen one himself.

The image of the crack from that memory and the one he was seeing now was astonishingly identical.

“…”

Memories from the past swirled ominously within Yuder. All the things that had descended from the start of that, the times when he was alone searching for answers, and the moment when he was finally standing under the gallows, briefly brushed past his mind.

Just as Yuder’s eyes darkened, Kishiar opened his mouth as if he had been waiting for that moment.

“But it seems to be a fitting name. The starting point of a disaster… Maybe that strange crack has some connection with the

excessively fast occurrence of monster incidents in the western region these days.”

In that instant, the dark memories flooding Yuder’s mind abruptly stopped.

“Do you think so?”

“It doesn’t look like a good phenomenon since even you felt it as ominous, and it’s a decent hypothesis, isn’t it?”

Every time he heard his argument, Yuder recalled the nobles who ignored their own circumstances, those who held power, and the rulers.

‘Aren’t you just overthinking everything? You’re not about to spout some doomsday theory, are you?’

‘We’ve heard this talk before. Do the research yourself. You made noise that the continent might be in danger, and now that you’re being touted as the best Awakener on the continent, are you trying to become a prophet?’

‘You’re really insane. At such an important time, you’re shirking your crucial mission of suppressing rebels against His Imperial Majesty and leaving? Are you sane, Commander Yudrain? So what about those signs and disasters? What’s so important about that? That’s just a phenomenon that occurs right before the monsters come out!’

Even when ordinary monsters appeared, they usually tore through similar cracks, but that was, according to the mages, a temporary phenomenon. Only the ones that existed in space for a long time without anything happening were found just before a disaster struck.

Many considered Yuder Aile's desire to unravel that secret as madness. Some whispered behind his back that he was acting as a prophet and challenging the authority of the Emperor.

Except for one man. He was already dead and in his grave at that time, but now he was strangely watching Yuder with a warm expression.

"You look somewhat off. What's the matter this time? Do you sense something strange again?"

"No…"

Yuder turned his head to avoid Kishiar's gaze. He didn't want to reveal his current feelings at all. After several deep breaths, he finally managed to calm down.

'Let's think about the crack.'

Of course, he had never met anyone who had seen such a crack when he had come to the monster subjugation mission to the West in his previous life. The few subjugation events he was involved in were not inside this dense forest but involved killing the large-scale monsters that had already infiltrated the Empire.

But even then, if such a phenomenon had already appeared, the start of the catastrophe on this continent might have been much earlier than Yuder had guessed.

'No. Perhaps, as Kishiar said, the abnormal occurrence of monsters in the west itself was already the first disaster.'

Kishiar had said it was just a hypothesis, but to Yuder, it sounded completely different. A certain certainty seized him in his shiver.

He blinked his eyes and looked straight up at Kishiar.

“The hypothesis you mentioned just now.”

“Hmm?”

“I also think it’s possible, so it would be better to investigate it in detail.”

“Really? Should I call Kanna?”

“No. It might be dangerous, so I will…”

“And you’re not in danger?”

Kishiar’s voice fell a little when suddenly a thud sound came from not far away. The mages who were still discussing and the Cavalry members who were observing the atmosphere of this place from a distance all looked in one direction.

“There’s no doubt this time, a real monster.”

As Kishiar mumbled, trees on the opposite side of the crack shook and made a creaking sound as they broke. The forest as a whole screamed as the trees collided with each other, broke, and fell one after another.

“It’s a monster! Be careful!”

With a sound like tens of thousands of birds taking flight at once, a being of unknown shape that hadn’t been there just a moment ago revealed itself through the gap. It had a grotesque appearance, staggering on two feet with a height that seemed to be about twice that of a human. Each time the scale-like things attached to its entire body vibrated, a terrifying sound like a scream echoed.

This creature was alive and moving, but it clearly had a different appearance from any animal or plant in this world. It was, without a doubt, a monster.

“Huge, it’s huge. It looks like the ones I saw in the field guide… What was its name?”

‘Maraedon.’

Yuder answered in his heart to a mage who was fumbling and retreating near him and looked around. He could see Kishiar casually reaching for the hilt of his sword revealed from his cloak.

“Do you intend to deal with it using that?”

“That’s why I brought it.”

“We’ll support you.”

As they exchanged these words, Lorna yelled, perhaps frustrated by their stillness and refusal to avoid the threat.

“Move back a bit! We will handle the monster with the tool we brought…!”

“It’s okay, it’s you who should move further back.”

“What did you say?”

“It’ll be over soon.”

The mages pulled out the defensive magic tools they had prepared in advance from their bags, their hearts anxiously burning. However, they never got a chance to use them.

As the monster’s enormous mouth, located near its belly, opened wide, Yuder used the power of the wind and earth to move the shattered trees that were scattered nearby and pulled them together.

In the brief moment when it hesitated, about to spit out its body fluids in reaction to the suddenly obstructing trees, a Swordmaster,

whose existence nobody had known until now, unsheathed his sword for the first time in front of everyone and sent out an aura.

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Chapter 257

It was a flash of light, ephemeral yet consequential.

“…”

In the brief yet profound silence, the logs gathered by Yuder’s power shattered into fragments. The monster that had been standing still behind them also split in two with a strange sound, sliding apart. Black bodily fluids gushed out, soaking the ground, and the dense forest that had been thriving let out a mournful cry.

Then, more trees than those broken by the emerging monster began to tremble and fell with a thud, one after another.

“Aaargh!”

Only then did the mages, who had barely regained their senses, scream. Yuder, without even thinking to dodge the fragments of branches brushing his cheeks, watched this overwhelming spectacle. Unlike when the monster appeared, everything was falling in the opposite direction from where the people were standing, so there was no fear of them getting hurt.

It took a while for the falling trees to finally stop and the dust to settle. Yuder felt a bright light hitting his face after the last tree had fallen, and he raised his hand to shield his eyes and looked up.

‘The sun…’

The forest had been so dense that no light could penetrate it, but now a large clearing had formed in a semi-circle around where the monster had stood, and the blocked sunlight was pouring into that area. Everyone was speechless at the sight, too surreal to be the result of a single action.

Yuder turned his head in the neatly cut clearing, large enough to build several houses, and looked towards Kishiar. He was still tightly gripping the handle of the sheathed sword, quietly observing the spectacle he had created.

Yuder felt a tingling sensation throughout his body for the first time, even though he was not the one who had achieved this result. He wondered how Kishiar, who had released the power he had been suppressing all this time, must have felt. He felt a strange regret that he couldn't see the emotions reflected in the red eyes hidden under the hat.

"…Are you okay?"

When he quietly asked, Kishiar finally moved his head a little towards Yuder. The corner of his lips, which had been closed indifferently, slowly rose.

"It's refreshing now that the sun is out."

He had thought that he would naturally adjust and swing the sword, but he was worried that he might have exerted too much power because the result was too tremendous. It was a relief that he seemed okay.

"Wha, wha, what was that just now?"

While the two were looking at each other, the others who had been behind them rushed over and surrounded them. The Cavalry members looked at them with faces full of surprise and admiration, Prince Ejain with a stern expression, and the mages with faces stained with shock and fear, not knowing what to do, looked up at Kishiar.

"Is that also the power of an Awakener? Or perhaps…?"

"Swo, sword…"

“Swo…”

Facing the mages who couldn’t dare to utter the word ‘Swordmaster’, a title held by only a few on this continent, Kishiar smiled.

“I am, a Cavalry member.”

‘Does he mean he used a sword but he won’t reveal his identity yet?’

While the Cavalry members, who had noticed the somewhat ambiguous meaning of the answer, were secretly exchanging glances, the mages seemed to take his words at face value and finally showed a look of relief.

“Ah… Ah, yes. I’ve heard that among the Awakeners, there are those who possess power that appears like the aura of a Swordmaster.”

“Right. There was a rumor about two years ago, wasn’t there? A ten-year-old kid split a rock with a tree branch……”

“That’s right. I remember that. I thought it was an exaggerated rumor at the time, but seeing today, it might not have been… Ha… ha…”

A smile slowly spread across the faces of the Cavalry members. It was a smile that could only be seen because they knew that the ten-year-old kid from back then was also in the Cavalry.

Yuder also thought of Jimmy, who would be training hard in the capital around this time.

‘Jimmy is talented and strong, of course. But… he probably couldn’t have achieved this result with a single move.’

There were a few more members who exhibited abilities similar to aura, including Jimmy. However, their inherent sword skills were not yet so impressive, so when they sparred using only pure swordsmanship without using their abilities, they would lose to Yuder.

But the perfect sword draw that Kishiar had just executed.

‘…’

After joining the Cavalry, he had hardly seen Kishiar swing a sword, let alone touch one. Unlike divine power or magic, which can be maintained without use, swordsmanship dulls if not practiced. This was true for anyone, but the movement of Kishiar he had just seen was so brilliant and beautiful that it seemed to break such common sense.

Yuder recalled a memory of when Kishiar’s hand had touched him, and he had fleetingly thought that it was the hand of a swordsman, which seemed to have done nothing harsh but was actually very firm. What kind of effort had he made in unseen places to maintain that hand, so that he could use it properly when a day like today came?

A chill ran down his neck again.

“Hey. The strange crack from earlier has disappeared!”

One of the mages, who was awkwardly putting away the magic tool he had drawn to attack the monster, suddenly shouted in surprise. Following his outcry, they all turned their heads and realized that the crack that had been floating near the monster had indeed disappeared.

“That’s true.”

“What happened?”

“We don’t need to fight anymore. Let’s go while we have the chance!”

“Yuder. What was there? We were in the back and couldn’t see anything…”

Yuder briefly explained the crack to Gakane, who asked cautiously.

“Do you know about the crack that appears just before a monster emerges?”

“Um. I’ve heard of it, but I haven’t seen it myself yet.”

“Something similar was in front of us.”

“Ah. So that’s where those monsters came from?”

Gakane’s gaze turned towards Kishiar, who had slaughtered the monster in one fell swoop. He seemed curious about the power Kishiar had shown, but he soon turned his gaze away, as it seemed inappropriate to speak out in the presence of Ejain and the mages.

“No. It had nothing to do with that. It was there before we arrived. The mages were discussing whether to ignore it or turn around.”

“Can that happen…?”

“It didn’t feel good just looking at it. It’s gone now, so we’ll have to check it out later.”

The sense of how strange it was seemed to vaguely dawn on them, and the expressions of the members who were listening to Yuder’s words hardened a little.

“We will now quicken our pace and get out of here before more monsters appear! Hurry up and follow!”

They hurriedly followed the mages who were moving ahead, avoiding the corpse of the monster. The party members, who had been retching due to the shock of the event, quietly followed with their faces lost in thought.

Yuder, sticking close behind Kishiar, sneakily glanced at the tip of the sheath of the divine sword, wrapped in his cloak. The sheath, which looked too far from practical use due to its excessive splendor, was covered in cloth to hide it from the eyes of others, but the divine sword was still a divine sword. He felt a more vivid presence from the sword, which had come out of the sheath for the first time in this life after Kishiar became its owner.

“Are you looking at the energy of the sword?”

“Ah… yes.”

At Kishiar’s question, he felt caught and answered in a small voice, and a low laugh flowed out from between the hat and the cloth. Yuder kept silent for a moment before bringing up the topic of the sword.

“It seems that no one has figured out what it is.”

“To the eye, it’s just a needlessly flashy cerEmunial sword.”

Kishiar jokingly replied in a small voice, as if sharing a secret between the two of them.

“Do you plan to continue using only that?”

“Hmm… if possible, I plan to do so. Both I and this guy need a period of adaptation. Since the control was not as good as expected, I will have to adjust it for a while and take the lead often.”

“You will have to explain to the other members.”

“Yes. That will be necessary.”

Saying so, Kishiar lightly touched the hilt of the sword hanging at his waist.

“By the way, it’s been a long time since this guy’s energy has spread out vividly enough to be seen. It seems too excited for the first time, so I need to calm it down.”

“You talk as if it’s alive.”

He threw the answer without thinking. But when Kishiar’s reply was slower than usual, a strange feeling came over him. Turning his head, Yuder met the red lips that were smiling with a slightly different color than before.

A chill ran down his fingertips.

“…You’re joking, right?”

“Strictly speaking, it doesn’t talk or move. In that sense, it’s not alive.”

“Then what is…”

“Ah! Another monster!”

Before he could ask what the meaning of that smile was, another scream erupted from the front. With a short laugh at Yuder’s scowling face, Kishiar leisurely stepped forward again.

“From now on, it seems that many monsters will appear, so protect yourself and the weak and fight accordingly. Don’t be ashamed to rely on your comrades. I will also move as a member of the party, so as I said before, I leave the overall command to the leaders.”

His gaze fell on Kanna and Yuder and then fell away. As Kishiar, who had lightly drawn his sword, moved forward, noise came from another direction as if monsters were appearing. Most of them seemed to be the same type as the monster they had just killed, but occasionally different ones were seen.

“I… I’m finally going to… fight a real monster… What should I do… I’m not good at it yet……”

“Don’t be afraid, Emun. Your power is darkness! First, bring the mages and protect them! You seem excessively frightened, it’s not good to leave you there. Gakane, I’ll need your help too.”

“Understood.”

“What should I do?”

“Your Highness… firstly, take your sword and guard the surroundings.”

Kanna, tightly gripping the trembling wrist of Emun, issued commands without hesitation to him, Gakane, and even Prince Ejain. Yuder followed the Eldore siblings, who were rushing forward with excited faces, with long strides, quietly catching his breath.

“Hinn, Finn.”

“Huh?”

“I know you’re excited, but what’s needed right now comes first.”

“…”

“Help Gakane and Emun, move all the mages to the back, then join the fight. This is a good opportunity to improve your teleportation ability.”

“…But I want to fight more right now?”

“You can’t always do what you want. If you move quickly, even after you’ve moved all the mages to the back, there will still be monsters left.”

“Okay. Got it…”

Though they were a bit disheartened, the Eldore siblings moved quickly as they always did, working together seamlessly. Yuder slipped between their gaps and stood behind Kishiar, who was facing the monsters that screamed so loud, it felt as if the surrounding forest would shake.

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Before him lay the bodies of a couple of monsters, already brought down and writhing in their death throes. The sight of him blocking the massive strike of a new monster with a thin sword, without being pushed back an inch, was so nonchalant that it bordered on awe-inspiring.

Yuder watched him, stretching out his hand towards the monster that appeared from Kishiar's diagonal blind spot, tearing through space itself.

'Now there.'

As soon as it appeared, the monster sank headfirst into the suddenly softened earth, reaching out its long arms in a floundering panic, its cry resounding like a bird flapping its wings. Unable to resist the monster's frantic struggle, the surrounding trees fell, crumbling with a creaking noise.

"Dodge!"

The cries and screams of people trying to avoid the huge trees falling due to the monster echoed from all around. At about this time, Kishiar, who had been fighting the monster and had just noticed the newly sunken monster, paused to look back at Yuder.

"…"

No words were exchanged, but his intention was clearly felt through the smile he revealed. Yuder continued to scan the surroundings, putting Kishiar, who was slashing at the sunken monster, behind him.

The Eldore siblings rushed towards the mages who were running around in fear, forcibly moving them to a safer rear position. The Cavalry members protected the relocated mages, confronting the monsters that appeared nearby. Some of the courageous mages stayed behind, attacking the monsters with magic tools drawn from their possession, though it didn't seem particularly effective.

'Mages who only use magic tools are probably unable to use attribute magic… Are those who are continuously preparing among them able to use attribute magic?'

In the center, under the protection of their colleagues, a few mages sweated profusely, waving their hands around as faint traces of magic spilled from their fingertips. Seeing one of them struggling to produce a flame after a considerable effort, Yuder unconsciously furrowed his eyebrows.

'Using fire in such a forest. Unless they are certain they can control it, there's a risk it might backfire…'

Shortly after, the monster hit by the hard-earned flame predictably caught fire but didn't die, instead, it thrashed around in a rage.

"Screech!"

"Ah! The fire is spreading to the trees! Quickly, use the water and wind magic tools!"

"What did you say?"

As the trees started to smoke and sway from the fire spread by the rampaging monster, the mages fell into even greater confusion.

"We're out of water, what should we do!"

Despite their strength, even the powerful Finn and Hinn seemed at a loss on how to deal with the fire, their expressions betraying their panic. Sighing, Yuder launched himself towards them, stepping on the wind.

“Step back, please.”

Seeing Yuder suddenly appear, stepping on thin air, the mages’ eyes widened in surprise. Immediately, he summoned wind to protect them, raising and lowering his hand. Responding to his movement, a stream of water conjured seemingly from thin air assaulted the monster and the burning trees instantly.

“Screeeaam!”

The stream, which normally could have punctured even a rock in an instant, only extinguished the fire when it touched the monster, not inflicting any significant damage and scattered in all directions. It was not an astonishing scene.

‘As expected, I can hardly deliver direct damage with my power.’

That was no different from his previous life. Thankfully, he could put out the fire quickly.

With a horrible scream and the smell of burning, amidst the smoke, Yuder drew his sword and powerfully slashed the leg of the monster before him. A rough sensation, like when scratching hard stone, and the intense excitement he hadn’t felt in a while exploded in his hand.

The monster’s wail tore through his ears. The injured monster swung its arm to crush him like a bug, but Yuder had no intention of obediently receiving its clumsy attack. He deflected the strike and slashed once more at the opposite leg, causing another scream to ring out.

“Aargh!”

The monster toppled over, spewing black fluid, wavering before collapsing to the side. Trees that had been half burnt by the fire collapsed once again. While thinking about how to cut off the writhing monster’s breathing, he heard a shout calling for him from behind.

“Yuder!”

“Are you okay?”

The Eldores, who had retreated behind the mages, cut through the smoke and quickly ran toward him like squirrels. Yuder swiftly conveyed his intentions to their worried faces.

“I’m fine. I’ll leave the finishing blow to you guys. Deal with it and send the remaining mages back.”

“Understood!”

It was comforting to have reliable comrades to depend on. Yuder moved away, listening to the sound of the Eldores eagerly beating the fallen monster into the afterlife, now that they were finally allowed to fight. The moment he escaped the smoke, he felt an increasing sense of massive presences surrounding him.

‘…It seems to be occurring sporadically not only around here but also in distant places. It must have something to do with that crack I saw earlier.’

The peculiar crack that had revealed itself before the disaster. He couldn’t shake off the feeling that the monsters appearing rapidly after its disappearance were somehow connected.

‘Everyone seems to be managing for now, but they’re not defeating the monsters fast enough. We don’t know how many more

will appear, so we should clean up quickly and move…’

Just then, a bright blue aura flew past above Yuder’s head, piercing through something before disappearing.

“Aaargh!”

Following that, a monster about the size of a child fell from a tree, its body torn in half. It looked like it had died the moment it had appeared, with its bat-like wings, attached to its limbs, not fully spread.

“Be careful.”

Yuder bowed his head a little, feeling somewhat strange as he turned to Kishiar, who had somehow gotten close to him.

“Thank you.”

When Kishiar shook his hand once, the black fluid of the monster dripped from the end of his sword and stained the ground. Despite most of the dead monsters around them likely being his work, he didn’t seem out of breath, which made the scene seem unreal.

“Currently, there’s no problem handling them, but the speed at which these monsters are appearing is strange. There have been few reports of large monsters appearing in such large numbers in a short time.”

“Yes, I was thinking the same.”

“That crack that disappeared earlier also bothers me. As you said, there might indeed be a close connection between the crack and this unusual event.”

As expected, Kishiar had been observing the surroundings and shared Yuder’s thoughts. The fact that he didn’t dismiss his words

made something deep within his chest resonate strongly once again.

The man, oblivious to what his assistant was feeling, surveyed the crumbling forest around them before quickly making a decision.

“We can’t stay in one place, or we’ll risk being surrounded. We need to force our way through.”

“As soon as a mage is appointed to guide us, I’ll cut down the trees to make a path.”

“Then, it’ll be my job to cut down anyone who blocks our way.”

“Will you be alright?”

At Yuder’s question, Kishiar wore a peculiar smile beneath his hat.

“Well, I think it’s I who should be asking that.”

“Pardon?”

“Didn’t you avoid mentioning that your powers don’t fully work against monsters, because you didn’t want to expose a potential weakness?”

Yuder’s eyes twitched for a moment. He had thought he was fairly good at fighting without revealing his weaknesses, thanks to the plentiful experiences from his past life, but he hadn’t expected his secret to be discovered so soon. The fact that Kishiar had accurately pinpointed and prodded at something that even the Eldore siblings, who had dealt the final blow to the monsters on Yuder’s behalf multiple times, seemed to be unaware of was incredibly shocking.

“…How did you figure it out so quickly?”

“I figured there must be a reason why my reckless assistant, who never hesitates to step forward, would yield only when it comes to monsters. I was certain of it when I saw you use water earlier.”

“…”

“Indeed, revealing a weakness prematurely is not good. The others still seem unaware, but it would’ve been better if you’d told me before we entered the forest.”

At these words, Kishiar once again swung his sword toward Yuder’s back. From the lingering smoke, another scream could be heard, followed by the sound of something hefty splitting and falling. As the trees continued to fall in succession, Yuder realized that Kishiar had poured even more strength into this attack than before.

He wondered if Kishiar was angry, but it was hard to gauge his emotions from just the lips concealed under his thick hat.

“…I apologize. I thought it wasn’t necessary to mention such matters.”

Yuder made an apology. To him, not revealing his weaknesses was such a natural act that he hadn’t even considered mentioning it, but he belatedly realized that Kishiar may have perceived this as intentional.

‘Kishiar informed me of his potential weaknesses beforehand, while I did not. Could he have felt suspicious about that?’

Yuder, unusually flustered, added more to his words.

“I didn’t intend to make you uncomfortable, Commander. Still, I won’t be a hindrance in this mission.”

Kishiar, turning to face him, let out a soft sigh.

“I’m not uncomfortable.”

An unknown emotion echoed in his low, resonant voice.

“I just thought that being too competent could be a problem as well.”

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What did it mean to say that being too competent could also be a problem? Unlike other times, it was difficult to ask this question outright. However, they were not afforded the leisure of further conversation. From behind, a new scream echoed again, and Kishiar readied his sword once more. A vivid blue energy slid down the silvery sword.

“We have no time now, let’s talk later.”

As Yuder nodded, Kishiar turned away. But after a few steps, he seemed to remember something and changed his direction, striding back to stand before Yuder.

“…”

There was no time to ask what was happening. From a distance close enough to touch with just one more step, a fleeting red gaze flickered below the horizon.

What was he trying to say? It wasn’t the time for standing idly, facing each other like this, but still, he couldn’t shatter this brief, peculiar tension that arose.

The screams that had been echoing faded away to a dull hum. The acrid smell, the smoke that made one’s eyes sting, and even the senses that had been keenly alert to any sign of monsters—everything relaxed. His senses, which had been widely spread out, all closed, leaving only the man before his eyes.

It was then that Kishiar, with his free hand, reached out to touch Yuder’s chin. His thumb moved gently, stroking the skin beneath his cheek. A moment later, he pulled his hand away. His white fingers were smeared with a bit of blood and a dark stain.

‘…Is that my blood?’

He hadn’t felt any pain, hadn’t realized he was injured, but now his skin stung a little. It must have happened while dodging the monster’s attack earlier.

“You can’t afford to get hurt anymore. Can you promise me that?”

Yuder lifted his gaze from Kishiar’s fingers to look at him again.

That strange feeling he’d experienced several times when facing Kishiar returned. An odd heat, ill-fitting for the situation, flowed from his heart to his fingertips and toes, then seemed to creep up to his eyes.

Unable to withstand this unbearable heat, Yuder evaded Kishiar’s gaze and voiced his dry agreement.

“…Yes.”

Only after the distant-sounding reply flowed out did Kishiar turn away. The slow and quiet world Yuder had been sensing then regained its proper speed.

“Yuder!”

His comrades’ voices calling him echoed from afar. Yuder took a deep breath and swiftly moved forward.

Not long after, having cleared all the surrounding monsters and finding a brief respite, the group gathered together to assess their current situation and briefly discuss their next course of action.

“I think we all agree that the frequency of the monster appearances is beyond normal. If we continue like this, we will surely be surrounded. Therefore, we should reduce the time spent dealing

with the monsters, cut down the obstructing trees, and move quickly. What do you think?”

The Cavalry quickly agreed with Yuder’s proposal, discussed in tandem with Kishiar. However, the mages couldn’t shake off their anxious expressions.

“That’s true. But how are we to quickly deal with the creatures that could appear from anywhere, and how are we supposed to cut down the trees? Unless we start a fire like before, it will be hard to cut down so many trees while avoiding injuring our own.”

“We’ve almost run out of the offensive magic tools we brought too…”

Yuder listened to the murmuring voices of the concerned mages with a troubled look on his face, before opening his mouth briefly.

“I will handle cutting the trees. All I need is one of you to guide me. There’s no need to worry.”

“You’re saying… you’ll do it all by yourself?”

The mages asked with a shocked expression on their faces.

“Yes.”

“Are you joking?”

“Yuder isn’t one to jest.”

“Seems like they still can’t believe it even after what they’ve seen.”

The Eldore siblings, who were sitting in the back like overstuffed little beasts, chuckled and whispered to each other. Hearing their words, a mage flinched and stiffened his shoulders. Lorna, her face smeared with soot, stepped forward to speak.

“To be honest… if it had been someone else saying this, I would have told them not to overextend themselves. But after what we just witnessed, I can’t help but believe. If it weren’t for you, we would have been wiped out earlier.”

Her voice was raspy from inhaling smoke during the battle.

“In a situation where our attack magic tools are almost depleted and we can’t offer much help, sticking with us is impressive in itself. It speaks volumes about your confidence in your skills.”

Her gaze alternated between her worn-out colleagues and the still-vibrant members of the Cavalry. The other mages, having gauged the disparity in their abilities from the recent battle, bowed their heads in defeat.

“Alright. We’ll follow your plan. And I’ll guide you. But what about the monsters we’ll encounter along the way? How do we deal with them quickly? Are you planning to handle that too?”

“Of course not. I will take care of that.”

Kishiar, who was standing behind Yuder, slowly raised his hand to interject.

“Leave the monster handling to me. You all just focus on moving.”

“So you’re the one who killed the most monsters earlier. I didn’t realize you still had the energy to step in.”

“I have plenty of energy. Do you need proof?”

The mages gaped at his cheerful voice, momentarily forgetting the situation.

‘What’s with him? We just had a fierce battle, and he acts like he’s been out for a leisurely stroll.’

‘He was charging around so much earlier, yet he doesn’t look winded, and there’s not a single speck of grime on him.’

‘How come we’ve never heard of such a powerhouse being in the Cavalry before?’

Amid the flurry of thoughts, Lorna, regaining her composure, nodded her head as if to make a decision.

“No, no proof is needed. We’ll follow your plan, then. Let’s get moving.”

“Understood.”

The party reorganized. Yuder and Lorna were at the front, followed by the mages bunched together, and the Cavalry members stood in a protective circle around them.

At the very end stood Kishiar, casually holding his drawn sword.

Yuder, surveying the aftermath of the battle before they set off, asked Lorna a question.

“Is the relic site, your destination, still far from here? Assuming we move in a straight line.”

“Not far. If we hadn’t been attacked by monsters, we would have arrived by now.”

“Understood. Let’s move.”

Lorna, looking off into the distance of the forest, promptly pointed in one direction.

“The research site is in that direction. The distant white-leafed tree… huh?”

“What’s the matter?”

As Lorna asked in an unusual tone, she looked back at Yuder with trembling eyes.

“…I can’t see it.”

“What?”

“The Western Mage Union made some of the leaves of the trees near the research site change color so only the mages could see them using a special method. They did this to find the research site from anywhere quickly. The thing that was visible just a moment ago… I can’t see it now.”

Both Lorna and Yuder could immediately guess what this meant.

“Something must have happened.”

“My goodness. This has never happened before. How could something like this…”

Yuder immediately turned around. He raised his hand towards the mages and Cavalry members who, like Lorna, seemed to be late in realizing the situation, their faces turning pale.

“Please remain calm, especially in situations like these. Let’s get moving. Kanna.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about this end. I’ll follow you well.”

To guide the panic-stricken mages without error, the Cavalry members protecting them had to stay even more vigilant. After a silent exchange of looks with Kanna, indicating she was to take up this task, Yuder patted Lorna’s shoulder and moved forward without hesitation.

“Let’s go.”

—-

The research site in the Great Sarain Forest created by the Western Mage Union was in complete chaos, looking like a typhoon had just passed. Shattered remnants of the magic circle, unable to withstand the attacks of numerous monsters, flickered sporadically in many places. Beneath the ruins of the destroyed buildings, the occasional fallen figure was seen.

While Yuder, who had cut down the last tree to get closer to the research site, was scrutinizing the scene with a furrowed brow, Lorna ran ahead, staggering and panting, unable to make a sound.

“Leader! Leader!”

“It’s dangerous.”

Before Yuder could stop her, a few monsters that had been crouched between the buildings raised their heads sharply.

“Screech!”

However, before the monsters could approach Lorna and Yuder, they were sliced by a light that came flying from behind, and their heads flew off instantly. It was the power of Kishiar, who had arrived a little later with the rest of the group.

“Ah…”

The mages collectively looked around with stunned faces.

“What, what is this…”

“It’s not all destroyed! Over there, a building is still standing!”

Ignoring the fallen monsters, Lorna, who had been running, pointed in a direction and yelled. Yuder saw the building she was pointing to. Monsters surrounded it and were attacking, but a

defensive barrier flashing around the building was barely holding them off.

Suddenly, a flame burst from inside, blasting a monster's head off. Seeing this, the mages cried out in relief.

"Let's go! We need to help them, quickly!"

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With their comrades' safety at risk and their patience worn thin, the mages were beyond the point of calm. Before joining the frantic mages, Yuder turned his gaze to Kishiar.

"What should we do?"

"We can't afford to lose the mages who've been with us so far. We need to rescue those still inside first and assess the situation."

"Understood."

Kanna, Emun, whose forte wasn't combat, Priest Lusan, and Prince Ejain remained behind while everyone else headed towards the battle-ridden building. The sight of numerous monster corpses scattered around the building suggested that those inside were desperately holding their ground.

In the heat of battle, Yuder protected a mage, who was fighting courageously with his remaining offensive magical tools, that was about to be skewered from behind by a new monster by causing the ground beneath the monster to sink about a foot, ensnaring its ankle.

"Roaaar!"

The sudden shift caused the monster to lose balance and wobble backward with a roar, startling the mage who quickly spun around.

"Gah…"

"Dodge to the side."

At Yuder's instruction, the mage rolled to the side just in time for the shadow clone of Gakein to spring forth, as if it had been waiting

for this moment, and tear the monster’s limbs apart. As black bodily fluids spattered and a tearing scream echoed, Gakein nearby frowned and covered his ears. Close to him, the Elder siblings were swelling their bodies, wrestling with the monsters.

The building, which had been eerily silent for a while, started to fire flames like cannons again, seemingly having realized they were allies. Not long after, all the surrounding monsters that had besieged the building were lying dead on the ground. Despite all of this, the one who claimed most monsters’ lives was Kishiar, who hadn’t moved much at all.

“Hah… hah…”

“Is… is it over now…”

The battle-worn mages, their surroundings smeared with black fluids, gasped for breath. Shortly after, the tightly shut door of the building swung open, revealing figures that looked just as battered.

A man stood at the forefront, wearing a mage’s robe adorned with a pearl brooch. His unkempt, ash-colored beard and eagle-like, yellow eyes conveyed a sense of vigor despite his age.

“Master!”

“You’re safe!”

“Good. You all made it back safely too. I regretted telling you to come back sooner… but it seems heaven was on our side.”

The man was Micalin Punt, the leader of the Western Mage Union. He comforted the rushing mages with a fatherly pat on their shoulders, radiating the shrewdness expected of a leader who had shouldered a group for a long time.

“What on earth happened? Weren’t you recovering the defenses after we left? How did our base get this devastated?”

“A few hours ago, monsters started spawning at an astonishing speed near the ruins. We never thought the number one defensive line that was breached at dawn would be breached again, especially since we hadn’t fully recovered it. Who knows what would’ve happened if you hadn’t arrived.”

“We’re really lucky we weren’t too late.”

“But… who are these people who helped us?”

The gaze of Micalin and all the mages turned to the Cavalry members standing behind them.

“These are the members of the Cavalry who helped us to get here,” said Lorna, speaking on behalf of the group.

Upon hearing her answer, the other mages who had followed Micalin out of the building gasped in unison.

“The Cavalry?”

“You mean the real Cavalry?”

The atmosphere, filled with the joy of mutual survival, froze over in an instant.

‘So, it comes to this.’

Even if they had received help just moments ago, the preexisting negative impressions of the Cavalry and the misleading information spread by Baron Willhem would prevail. They would likely not believe immediately. The other Cavalry members also didn’t reveal any signs of discomfort or surprise, each seemingly making a similar judgment for their own reasons.

Caught in the middle, uncertain of what to do, were Lorna and the mages who had come with her.

“I understand what you might be thinking. But it’s all a misunderstanding.”

“True. We were shocked at first too. But once we got to know them, they turned out to be great people!”

“A…misunderstanding?”

“Yes, a misunderstanding!”

“If it weren’t for their help, we wouldn’t have made it this far, we would be dead. You saw them assisting just now!”

Amid the chaos, the mages following Micalin fell silent and turned their gaze toward their leader. It was up to him to make the final decision. Micalin, who had been quietly observing the Cavalry, finally spoke again.

“Are you really the Cavalry?”

“Yes, we are.”

Micalin scanned the figure of Yuder, who had stepped forward to respond.

“You look quite young to be a representative… May I consider you as such?”

Yuder glanced briefly at Kishiar before nodding.

“Yes, I am Yuder Aile, the aide-de-camp.”

“I am Micalin Punt, the head of the Western Mage Union. Let’s skip further formalities due to the circumstances.”

Without a handshake, Micalin concluded the introductions and exhaled deeply.

“Lorna is a trustworthy mage. Since we’ve received help, it’s only right to offer hospitality. Things are quite messy, but come inside for now. We can talk about this misunderstanding later.”

They followed Micalin into the building. The moans of the injured echoed around the structure, which was apparently originally intended for research. The sight of the injured visibly darkened Priest Lusan’s face.

Without asking for permission, he immediately approached an injured person and knelt down to assess the situation.

“Are you okay?”

“Uh…ugh…”

“The broken area looks severe. Can someone help me? I need to set the bone and use the Divine Power immediately.”

His assertiveness surprised the mages. Micalin Punt was no exception.

“You said you are from the Cavalry, but you’re a Priest…?”

“He is a Priest in our group. It seems he intends to start treatment immediately. Could you perhaps assign a few mages to assist him?”

Micalin maintained a strange silence. Taking his expression as doubt, Lorna once again stepped forward to speak.

“Master, there is no need for suspicion. That person is truly a Priest of the Sun God. He saved Elvil from the brink of death. If we hadn’t happened to meet in the village, and if he hadn’t extended his kindness, we might have had to return after burying Elvil’s corpse.”

“…Elvil?”

“Yes.”

Micalin alternated his gaze between Lusan and Yuder. His previously sharp expression finally softened. His eyes, which had been shaking as though filled with human emotions, briefly darted upward to the ceiling before he regained control.

“…Understood.Jean, Roca, Mule. Go help him.”

“Ah, understood.”

The atmosphere lightened as the mages immediately rushed to assist Lusan. Micalin swiftly repositioned the mages who were following him, instructing them to go outside to handle the situation, leaving only a few mages, including Lorna, by his side. He then turned to face the Cavalry members.

“What a mess. We’ve been fighting monsters non-stop since yesterday, unable to even catch a wink of sleep. I can’t understand where these cursed creatures keep coming from.”

Micalin took a big gulp from the cold water that a mage handed to him, and let out a rough sigh as he wiped his mouth. There was deep fatigue swirling above his wrinkled eyes.

“Now, tell me. What misunderstanding did I, Micalin Punt, have about you?”

“Before that, please accept this first.”

Yuder offered a letter from Thais Yulman that he had kept hidden. Micalin accepted the letter, saw the name written on the outside, frowned, briefly set it aside, then brought it close to his eyes again.

“…Where are my emergency glasses? Can someone fetch them for me?”

“H-here they are, Sir.”

Finally wearing his glasses, Micalin once again scrutinized the letter before carefully opening it to read its contents. The mages, feeling tense at their leader’s unusual behavior, focused all their attention on his fingertips.

“…There’s no room for doubt. This is truly a letter from Thais.”

Mixed emotions were evident in the words that Micalin muttered as he put the letter down after a while.

“You… were really from the Cavalry, weren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Rather than expressing annoyance as this point had already been clarified several times before, Yuder simply chose to give a brief response, void of any emotional change.

“I see. Thais was conducting some research over there… Can I ask what it was about?”

“I apologize, but I can’t disclose that.”

“No communication for several years and now I see his name again in a place like this.”

A complicated look passed over Micalin’s eyes. After a moment, he lowered his eyes and wore a weary smile for the first time.

“That’s so like Thais.”

Yuder could finally perceive that Micalin Punt, who had been as sharp as an eagle eyeing its prey, had slightly let down his guard.

Micalin, who had been quietly looking at the letter, abruptly changed the topic.

“Thais and I share the same mentor, and we’re of the same age. But because he entered the Pearl Tower six months ahead of me, he always tormented me. To be honest, the reason I relinquished my position in the council of the Pearl Tower Elders was because I didn’t want to face that man.”

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Suddenly, Lorna's expression turned peculiar as she unexpectedly came to understand the true reason why their respected leader had left his position in the council of Elders. Yuder was equally perplexed, uncertain how he should respond.

'…Didn't he say they were friends?'

Thais had confidently declared that Micalin, the head of the Western Mage Union, was his friend and would respond amicably when presented with the letter. However, the reaction of the recipient of the letter was unexpectedly different.

Indifferent to how the people around him were feeling, Micalin continued speaking, his eyes reflecting a memory from the past.

"Even the last time we met, we had a fight over our differences regarding the changing situation of magic power in the present time. We ended up in a fistfight, and I remember him shouting that the next time we'd meet would be at his funeral…"

"…"

At this point, it was clear that their relationship had moved beyond mere rivals and into the realm of enemies.

"…Yet, ironically, I owe my life to that man in a moment when I was on the brink of death."

Caught off guard by the sudden change in atmosphere, Yuder looked up. Micalin was watching him, a twisted smile on his face.

"In all my years, I have come to understand how unpredictable life truly is."

The old mage sighed deeply, gazing at the letter in his hand for a long time before folding it back.

“Did Thais say anything else when he sent this letter?”

“He was… worried about the Cavalry who were embarking on their first extermination mission. He said that once we arrived in the West, if we showed you the letter, you, as his friend, would help us,” Yuder replied.

“Friend!”

Micalin laughed harshly, stroking his thick, bristly beard.

“Seems he’s forgotten how badly we parted. Truly shameless, that man. Don’t you agree?”

Faced with this question that seemed to demand agreement, Yuder hesitated before responding.

“…I think his passion for research is extraordinary.”

“There’s no need for such a polite phrase. It’s sufficient to say that on the outside, he appears fine, but inside he’s mad!”

With that final insult towards Thais Yulman, Micalin handed the letter back to Yuder.

“Now, take this back. I’ve confirmed its contents, so dispose of this cursed letter as you please. Burn it or return it, I don’t care. Let’s move on to something more important.”

‘…Does this mean he’s finally willing to listen?’

While the exact reason wasn’t clear, the fatigue and caution that had filled his gaze earlier seemed to have softened significantly. It appeared that Thais Yulman’s letter had served its purpose in some way or another.

As Yuder contemplated the unpredictable nature of mages, he began to explain how he had met Lorna and her party in the village before coming here, and the conversation they'd had.

He emphasized that although the Tain Duke's family had requested the Cavalry's assistance, he had explicitly rejected it, and that they had come here to assess the situation and handle monster extermination independently of them. When he mentioned this, Micalin let out a low grunt of acknowledgment.

"So, the Cavalry has never actually met with Baron Willhem?"

"Correct. We were the first dispatched from the Cavalry and came straight here without visiting Tainu. If it weren't for Lorna, we wouldn't even have known about Baron Willhem."

"Did he really not know about the Magic Spring Ruin?"

"Our primary mission is to assess and handle any abnormalities in the monster population. If we truly were interested in the ruins, our Commander would have already contacted the Western Mage Union."

Micalin studied Yuder's impassive face, who carefully answered to ensure that he could fully feel that the mages were not the enemies of the Awakeners and the Cavalry but one of the citizens to protect.

"So…what is your evaluation of the current situation after the Cavalry has come this far?"

This was a question bordering on a test. Yuder instinctively felt that this was the turning point for the possibility of the Western Mage Union and the Cavalry directly collaborating.

'The boundaries are almost gone now. Thanks to the assistance provided so far, if well managed, this is a great opportunity to

establish a cooperative relationship.’

If he could get help from the mages who had been researching here for several years, handling the current situation would be incomparably easier than in his past life. He subtly moved his eyes to find Kishiar. The man, who stood quietly in a place that Yuder could find without any movement, nodded his head slightly enough that others would find it difficult to notice as soon as he met his gaze. It was the meaning of permission without even asking a question. Yuder smoothly continued his response.

“…Before we came here, I thought the situation might become much more serious than expected. If we take the slightly more severe monster emergence than in previous years lightly, we will certainly suffer great damage.”

“Like our Western Mage Union stronghold did.”

“Who could perfectly anticipate and handle such an event? The important thing is to find a way not to further increase the damage in the future.”

“Good words. But how? Even if we ask for help from that Baron Willhem and the Duke of Tain, those slow guys are so stingy they will surely try to send support as late as possible. Do you think you can handle this situation with your power alone?”

“Of course, it would be difficult with our power alone. However, if the leader believes in us and helps us, it won’t be impossible.”

“Hmm. Do you see that much power in us? You surely don’t mean we should take the lead and be the guide, considering all the damage we’ve taken.”

There was always a sharp bone in Micalin’s words. It was a deliberate act, a harsh response intended to minimize any potential

harm to the union he led and to understand the intentions of Yuder and the Cavalry.

However, Yuder was very accustomed to this kind of response from his long time as a Cavalry Commander. If he were really a twenty-year-old boy, he might not have been able to resist those words, but he was not swayed by such blatant remarks now. The best way to not be swayed by such people was not to give them time to think and to calmly strike their weak spots.

“Right before the massive outbreak of monsters as we entered Great Sarain Forest today, we saw a strange crack in the air.”

Micalin tilted his head towards Yuder, who suddenly brought up a different story.

“Hmm?”

“The crack from which the monsters usually emerged was entirely different this time. It was broader, a strange form that simply lingered in mid-air for quite a long time. Then, when it disappeared, monsters began to spawn at a rapid pace, most of them large creatures, twice the size of a human.”

Micalin turned to look at Lorna as if to confirm this was true. She nodded seriously.

“His statement is true.”

“I’ve never seen a crack like this before, and it was extremely ominous. To speak frankly, I… no, we speculated that this crack might somehow be connected to the unusual monster outbreak happening in the West.”

“…Evidence?”

“None. However, wouldn’t the Western Mage Union, who have been researching here for several years, perhaps know more about this crack in the air than us? There might be someone who has already seen it.”

“…”

“No one knows when that crack might appear again. Perhaps it has already appeared nearby and disappeared again, causing more unusual occurrences. I believe that now is the time for quick judgments and cooperation rather than testing each other’s intentions. That is, if we don’t want to lose anything more important.”

His words were audacious to an extreme degree. Micalin blinked, taken aback, then after a moment, let out a sound that was either laughter or amazement.

“Heh.”

“If you, Leader, make a quick decision, our Cavalry will cooperate immediately. We hope you’ll trust that our only aim is to solve this issue early and reduce the harm to the innocent citizens of the West.”

Silence stretched on for a while. Yuder quietly stood, waiting for Micalin’s answer. After a moment, Micalin, who had been lost in thought with his arms crossed, let out a loud, amused laugh.

“You’ve got guts. I thought you were just a child, but it seems I’ve been taught a lesson.”

“…”

“Very well. Let’s cooperate.”

“Leader…”

The young mages behind Micalin could not hide their surprise.

“I don’t like indecisive people. But as I grow older, I find myself becoming like them. Yet hearing such straightforward words after so long feels refreshing.”

Micalin stepped forward, extending a hand towards Yuder.

“Let’s shake on it again, properly this time.”

His voice and gaze had changed, reflecting much more respect for his counterpart. Yuder shook Micalin’s hand. After a firm handshake, Micalin spoke immediately.

“About that crack you mentioned last… it so happens that one of our mages also reported witnessing something similar near an artifact we were researching. I didn’t pay it much attention at the time due to the chaos, but hearing you speak of it reminded me. Would you like to meet him and hear the story?”

“Really?”

Yuder nodded instantly.

“I’d like to hear it right away, if possible.”

The artifact, the strange crack, signs of a looming disaster.

Noticing Yuder’s mind whirling with these thoughts, Micalin shot him a meaningful glance.

“He’s likely resting in another room due to his injuries. Follow me.”

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For the sake of the patient's stability, Micalin allowed no one other than himself and Yuder to follow. Yuder shot a glance toward Kishiar, then followed Micalin directly up to the upper floors.

Inside the room they entered, following a corridor cluttered with broken items, several wounded mages lay asleep.

"These are the ones who were injured at dawn. I put them to sleep with magic for a quick recovery."

With that explanation, Micalin moved towards the innermost bed. As he gently touched the shoulder of a sleeping mage, the man slowly opened his eyes.

"Leader… are you here?"

"Yes, Skelly. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I apologize for causing you concern and being unable to help….."

"The wounded needn't trouble themselves with unnecessary thoughts."

At Micalin's response, the mage called Skelly sighed.

"How can I not, knowing everyone is injured and struggling. But who is that behind you… I seem to see a new face."

To the young mage's anxious and defensive gaze towards Yuder, Micalin extended a reassuring hand.

“He’s a collaborator who agreed to help overcome this situation. Just listen to our conversation, no need to worry.”

“A collaborator?”

“Yes, Skelly. Actually, the reason I came to see you today is to hear more about the crack in the air phenomenon you mentioned yesterday. Do you remember what you said then?”

At Micalin’s words, Skelly widened his eyes.

“If you mean the one I saw at the ruins… Wasn’t it concluded that I was just being overly sensitive?”

“It was. But I thought that it might not be a false alarm.”

“Pardon?”

“The crack you saw appeared again today. So, I thought we should revisit your account.”

The mage, his arm bandaged, alternated his gaze between Micalin and Yuder, then slowly sat up.

“If that’s the case… I understand. It was too strange to simply dismiss as a figment. I’ll tell you everything I remember.”

Skelly began to slowly recount the previous day’s events.

“It was in the afternoon when I went to do my shift at the ruins. Gemma and Shail were repairing the barrier, and I was monitoring the changes in the distribution of magic power. It had definitely increased compared to a few days ago. While I was recording that, something strange caught my eye. At first, I thought it was the shadow of a tree, but upon closer inspection, it was a long crack that had appeared in thin air.”

The crack that Skelly described was almost identical to what Yuder had seen.

‘So, it wasn’t the first time it appeared today.’

The crack witnessed before the disaster in his previous life wasn’t a one-time occurrence. During the earthquake in the south, more than ten witnesses claimed to have seen something similar to the crack in different areas on different dates.

While not all of their statements might have been true, even the number of witnesses found after the incident suggested the possibility that cracks might have appeared and disappeared without anyone noticing.

Tracking the crack alone was difficult, so he had left it as a hypothesis. Now, knowing the truth quickened his heartbeat.

“Fearing a monster might emerge, I had hurried off to summon Gemma and Shail, but by the time I returned, the crack had vanished. Gemma speculated I might have seen an illusion. Shail too suggested that some had been seeing such illusions at the ruins recently and advised me to take a break from research for a while. I had agreed, but just in case, I reported it to the Leader.”

However, Micalin, upon hearing Skelly’s report at that time, did not take the matter too seriously. It was common for mages, weary from long research, to occasionally see things. And not long after, the surprise attack by monsters that appeared with the darkness of night had robbed them of all leisure, and the story of the strange crack in the air soon faded from their minds.

“Thanks for telling me. Now rest a bit more.”

After speaking, Micalin put the weary Skelly back to sleep and looked back at Yuder.

“What do you think?”

“It seems that the crack he saw is not much different from what I’ve seen.”

“So, there is indeed a connection between these phenomena…”

Micalin frowned and fell into thought. Yuder, watching his expression, hesitantly spoke up.

“You just mentioned that there were mages who have seen illusions at the ruins recently, could it be possible that these illusions include such cracks?”

“Hmm, I knew that the number of people seeing illusions had increased, but I assumed it was due to the strain of recent advances in research.”

Yet, Micalin fell silent, seemingly considering the point valid.

“We should look into it.”

They headed back down the stairs. Yuder followed Micalin, mentally preparing what he would report back to the party.

“Leader, have you finished speaking with Skelly?”

“Yes, it seems what he saw was the same phenomenon as the strange crack that appeared today.”

At Micalin’s brief explanation, everyone gasped.

“So, …”

“Although you’re all busy with cleaning up the site, there’s something you need to investigate immediately.”

Micalin gave orders to the mages under him, including Lorna.

“Weren’t there quite a few who claimed they saw illusions while exploring the ruins recently? Ask them what they saw, where they saw it, and if they felt anything strange at the time. Anything they can remember, even vaguely.”

The mages nodded solemnly.

“Understood.”

It didn’t take them long to find answers. The responses they gathered while circling around were astonishing.

“It seems like two really saw illusions, while about half a dozen saw something like a crack in the air that could be mistaken for a shadow, like Skelly did. If we include those who are currently out in the village or those in the western base, the number may even increase.”

The mages who had retrieved the answers also looked surprised, as if they hadn’t expected such a result. The expression on Micalin, their Leader, grew even more grave.

“…So, did you also find out when this was first seen?”

“It’s not certain, but among those present here, the first one to see it… it seems like at least a month ago. At the time, it appeared very briefly and vanished, startling them with the thought of a possible monster appearance, but when nothing happened, they soon forgot about it.”

“Was it also near the ruins?”

“Yes.”

Micalin, who seemed dumbfounded, raised his voice toward the mages.

“But how did not a single one of you think to pay attention to this until now? You should have reported to Tainu immediately!”

“I-I apologize.”

“No… no, it’s not your fault. It’s probably because we’ve been constantly moving between Tainu and the Great Sarain Forest, with no one consistently staying put. Even I have not visited in the past few months, so who can I blame?”

Micalin, tucking back his tousled hair, turned his keen, saffron-colored eyes towards Yuder.

“It seems we, who claimed to be in pursuit of truth, have turned a blind eye to the phenomenon that was already unfolding. We’ve shown a shameful image.”

“That’s not true.”

“About a month ago, coincidentally, significant changes in the distribution of magic power were observed at the ruins we were studying. It seems highly likely there’s some sort of connection, but… right now, due to the crisis, it’s difficult to go there.”

“Then could you at least explain a bit more about what you were studying at the Magic Spring Ruins? I’m not sure what you mean by a change in the distribution of magic power, but if I understand what it is, it might help.”

“Well…”

Micalin looked thoughtfully at Yuder and the rest of the Cavalry, struggling with what to say. Even though they had decided to cooperate, discussing the details of the research was obviously causing him some consternation.

However, he quickly made his decision.

“Have you ever heard that the number of mages entering the Pearl Tower every year is dwindling?”

The words, heavily uttered by the old mage, made all the Cavalry blink in unison. Yuder had vaguely heard about the issue in his previous life, but feigned ignorance for the moment.

“I think I’ve heard something about it… but I’m not quite sure.”

“Among us mages, this has been one of the big problems that have been going on for at least several hundred years. Especially in the past few decades, it has gotten worse. There are even rumors that at this rate, mages might disappear altogether.”

“…”

“The only reason why the number of mages is dwindling and the number of those who can’t use offensive magic is increasing is simple. The magic power in this world is slowly thinning.”

Upon hearing Micalin’s direct explanation, the expressions of the mages standing behind them darkened.

“We were excavating the Magic Spring Ruins to find a solution to this. Although, by now, even the Pearl Tower doesn’t have much hope for our research.”

The research was on a much larger scale than Yuder had anticipated. As he listened to the complex explanations that followed, he tried to recall what the mages of the Western Mage Union had previously said about the Magic Spring.

Kishiar had told the Cavalry that there was a legend that the earliest mages drew their power from the Magic Spring. It seemed that the mages of the Western Mage Union had been excavating ruins presumed to be this Magic Spring in an attempt to find a way to restore their power.

‘It’s unclear whether the ruins they discovered really are the Magic Spring or where it once existed… But it’s certain that, even unknowingly, more magic power has pooled there than anywhere else. Just like the mountain range where the Red Stone was found.’

Yuder didn’t know much about magic, but thankfully, he now had Kishiar, who was knowledgeable on the subject, with him. When he subtly shifted his gaze, he saw the tall man still standing motionless, showing no reaction. He was fully focused, not missing a word of Micalin’s explanation.

The mere thought that he didn’t have to find the answers on his own made him feel significantly better.

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“Leader, my apologies for interrupting your conversation. Regarding the tasks you’ve ordered, there are too many things that require your personal attention and decisions. It seems we can no longer afford to delay…”

“Ah, this has gone on longer than I anticipated.”

At the request of the young mage who had interrupted his discussion about their research, Micalin abruptly rose from his seat.

“I understand you all need rest after battle, but given the circumstances, it has been hectic. We will step out for a while. Please take this opportunity to rest and discuss the details of our cooperation. As you said, we don’t have time to waste.”

“Understood.”

After Micalin and the mage hurriedly exited, the members of the Cavalry who had been holding their tongues began to vent their complaints.

“My back and shoulders are killing me.”

“That’s to be expected after all the fighting we’ve done. You should rest and loosen up those muscles.”

“That leader sure gives off an intense impression. Whew. Just standing in front of him makes me tense.”

As the members checked on each other’s condition, Yuder silently turned his gaze toward Kishiar. The man, who had been keeping a low profile until now, approached in response to his gaze and quietly opened his mouth.

“I didn’t expect we’d be forming an alliance so quickly, but it’s something that had to be done, so it’s good that it happened.”

“…Yes.”

Yuder, looking at him, cautiously added.

“I was worried that I might be acting contrary to your wishes, Commander. I am relieved if that is not the case.”

“Why would it be?”

Kishiar, with a candid reply, soon softened his tone.

“It’s natural not to miss an opportunity waving in front of your eyes. At one point, I even mistook you for Kanna Wand.”

“I wasn’t that…”

“Don’t be so modest.”

Whether Kishiar’s compliment, which may or may not have been fortunate for Kanna, who was in conversation with other members, made Yuder’s response tremble, Kishiar silently chuckled. It seemed almost fantastical how Yuder once muttered that being too competent could also be problematic.

“So, how should I praise you then?”

“You don’t have to, just focus on the cooperative plan that Micalin mentioned.”

“No, good work should be praised. That’s a priority.”

Kishiar, who had been muttering about how to do it, reached out to Yuder a moment later. Yuder initially thought he was going to ruffle his hair again, but instead, Kishiar’s hand skimmed past his ear and lightly patted his shoulder before pulling away.

“You must have had a hard time dealing with this alone, but you did well. Thanks to you, the rest of our dispatched forces will have an easier time here.”

“…”

Yuder rarely felt such deep embarrassment. It was obvious he wouldn’t touch his head in such a public place, but he had lost some objective judgment due to Kishiar’s numerous spontaneous behaviors.

“That aside, the last bit of research discussion was quite interesting. I can hardly believe I was oblivious to it until now.”

The man, oblivious to Yuder’s internal struggle, smoothly shifted the topic. Yuder, calming the turmoil in his chest, recalled the last bits of the research discussion before Micalin left. Soon, he was able to regain his composure.

“I had little knowledge of magic, so many aspects were difficult to comprehend. Commander, have you grasped everything?”

“As much as necessary.”

The fact that he had comprehended the complex magic research that Micalin had hurriedly explained was impressive in and of itself. Kishiar, who had been silent, seeming to contemplate how to explain further, continued after a moment.

“In simple terms, they discovered a place within this forest where magic energy is densely concentrated. They have attempted to induce change there over several years. Until recently, there was no sign of progress, but they’ve started seeing changes and were hoping to regain support from the Pearl Tower…”

Though Kishiar’s explanation was much more succinct than Micalin’s, it was still difficult to fully understand.

Nevertheless, the critical point was singular. Western Mage Union had observed phenomena that suggested an impending disaster several times, unbeknownst to even them, and changes began to occur in the subjects of their research around the same time.

‘I had thought that there was only a connection between the strange cracks in the air and the monster’s anomalies, but now there’s the alteration of the ruins the mages were researching…’

The moment when changes in the ruins were detected, the time when the cracks were first observed, and when monsters in the West began to act unusually. Could these coinciding events be a mere coincidence?

‘To find the answer, I need to investigate these ruins more closely.’

The Magic Spring in the ruins, which was not considered important at first, might have been the most critical factor in this case. This was merely speculation at this point and could be wrong, but even the thought was startling.

Being more cautious than ever, Yuder asked Kishiar a question.

“Commander, do you think the changes in the ruins could be related to the anomalies with the monsters…or the strange crack we saw earlier?”

“Well, just because events overlap in timing does not necessarily mean they are related. But…”

Kishiar paused midway through his response. His gaze, from beneath his thick hat, scanned over Yuder’s face, more serious than ever.

“…It seems my assistant already thinks so. Don’t you?”

For a moment, Yuder felt as if his inner thoughts had been precisely pricked. His eyelid twitched slightly.

“Wouldn’t your judgment be more accurate than mine, Commander?”

“I find your eyes and your judgment more trustworthy.”

Kishiar responded as if it were nothing, left a brief pause, and rubbed his chin as he continued.

“Anyway, if you really want to hear my answer, yes. I, too, feel the need to investigate the changes at the ruins site more closely.”

“Really?”

“Of course, not right now.”

Kishiar gave a clear answer and slightly turned his head. Following his gaze, Yuder turned to see the back of Prince Ejain, who was conversing with the Cavalry members, and narrowed his eyes.

“We can proceed with specific cooperation with the mages after the second dispatch arrives. Until then, we need to finish what we must do now. We can’t delay our priorities.”

“…”

The original plan was to immediately deliver the letter upon visiting the stronghold of the mages within the Great Sarain Forest, and promptly depart. However, due to the unforeseen outbreak of monsters, they were caught up in continuous battles, and much of the day had already been consumed.

“I understand. We can’t afford to waste any more time here. … So, should I tell Mikalin that we will proceed with detailed

discussions later, and leave a brief oath in writing?”

How could they guarantee that the minds of the mages wouldn’t change in the time it took them to escort Prince Ejain to his destination and return? In order to maintain their mutual agreement to cooperate, a tangible assurance was needed. An oath, the most common form of guarantee, was proposed with this intent, but Kishiar immediately shook his head.

“No, there’s a far more reliable option. We can leave some of our party here, including Priest Lusan, and go.”

“Excuse me?”

At the unexpected suggestion, his eyes widened, and Kishiar spoke unabashedly.

“There are many here who need treatment. The mages currently need the power of a priest more than anyone else, and they could use help defending this place, if possible. Isn’t it more trustworthy to leave people who can actually help here, instead of depending on mere words?”

‘…That is definitely a good point.’

It was a reasonable suggestion. The Cavalry members were exceptional in their abilities, so even if they left a few here while taking Prince Ejain to his destination, there would be no issue in fulfilling their mission. However, in the Western Mage Union filled with injured, any remaining strength would be desperately needed.

‘Even if I was the only one left with Prince Ejain, there would be no chance of him dying or getting hurt.’

After making a cool judgment, Yuder soon nodded his head, expressing his agreement.

“I understand. Then who are you thinking of leaving behind?”

“Who do you think?”

“Um…”

Would it be Kanna, who could quickly gather the most honest information among the mages? Or perhaps it could be Gakane, who was naturally attractive and friendly enough to lower others’ guards and possessed enough skill to handle the monsters.

The Eldore siblings, who excel at evacuating others in emergencies, would also be suitable. Emun, with his peculiar ability to hide targets in darkness from the gaze of enemies or monsters, wasn’t a bad choice either.

‘Although the chance of leaving Emun, whose ability I’ve chosen to initially hide and protect Prince Ejain in case of emergencies, might be low…’

“Is it really something that requires such deep thought?”

While Yuder was deep in thought, Kishiar questioned him with a tone implying he should’ve known by now.

“Is it Kanna?”

“No.”

“Then it must be Gakane.”

“No, not him either.”

“Then…”

“Neither Hinn Eldore nor Finn Eldore.”

Watching Kishiar predict and answer his queries, Yuder suddenly thought of a possibility he hadn't considered.

'…Wait. Could it be?'

"Could it be… me?"

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Chapter 264

“Surely… you can’t mean me?”

“…”

In response to his question, Kishiar’s lips curved in what was, thus far, the most complex expression of emotion.

Yuder fell silent, at a loss for words. This made no sense. He wanted to believe he had misunderstood, but Kishiar’s gaze left no room for error, it clearly indicated that he had chosen Yuder.

“Is this because of the peculiarity of my abilities?”

The voice that emerged after a considerable pause was the most rigid and coarse it had ever been.

“I recall clearly that I assured you my abilities would not hinder the mission.”

“Indeed, you did.”

“Then why me… No, I beg you to reconsider. My presence here would be far less helpful than by the side of the Commander and the others. I request that you consider which would truly be best.”

Kishiar didn’t know how badly this mission could turn if handled improperly. In his previous life, numerous members, including Gakane, perished during a subjugation mission. If the monster’s abnormality exceeded their capacity to handle, Kishiar might experience another crisis. Adding to that, there was a chance that Prince Ejain may not return to his homeland alive.

Without him, how could all these possibilities be mitigated? Merely imagining all the bad things that could happen without him there, Yuder's heart tightened and his pulse quickened tremendously.

"No matter how many times I think about it, my conclusion doesn't change. This is the best course of action, as I see it."

Yet Kishiar's voice remained infuriatingly calm.

"But I don't know much about magic."

"Knowing or not won't make much of a difference."

"Wouldn't it be better if you and Kanna stayed together instead? The mages will never let their guard down around me."

"Even after you just spectacularly broke down Micalin Punt's guard, you're saying this?"

Yuder knew that he could never outtalk Kishiar, but never before had this fact been so frustrating. Grinding his teeth, he mumbled at Kishiar.

"I can't sit by idly while something might happen to the Commander or my comrades in my absence. I am not that submissive."

At that, Kishiar let out a short laugh. Without seeing his eyes, it was hard to gauge his emotions, but the laugh was oddly sweet, ill-suited to the situation.

"What if I wanted you to do exactly that?"

"…"

It was an unbelievable request, but incredibly, Yuder's protest lost its force before that smile. He attempted to speak a few times, but

his mouth was immobile as if it had been struck in a vital spot. To suppress his churning emotions, Yuder bit his lip and lowered his gaze.

And as if he had been waiting for that moment, Kishiar's lips moved slightly.

"The one who can become the sign of the greatest faith to the mages, the one who is confident to protect the many here and Priest Lusan alone, and the one who can perceive something extraordinary amidst the events here. There is only one person who can do that. Yuder Aile."

Only you.

In this world, there was only one man who could command Yuder Aile, and that man, now more than ever, called his name with a clear intention. His gaze gently swept across Yuder's face, heavy with anxiety. At first glance, his eyes appeared calm and composed, but Yuder then realized that the fragments of emotion hidden within did not reflect the same tranquility.

"Remember the version of yourself that agreed to leave someone here, because you trust the abilities of your companions."

The statement hit Yuder like a splash of cold water. As Yuder's face twisted slightly, Kishiar offered his final compromise with a soft voice.

"Three days. Endure for just three days. If we don't return within that period, you're allowed to act freely."

It was a statement akin to a final notice. Yuder was forced to accept the fact that he could no longer persuade Kishiar.

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“Leave Yuder and Priest Lusan here, and just us proceed?”

Kishiar, having made the decision, immediately informed the rest of the group. The members appeared surprised but soon accepted Kishiar’s decision. No one seemed overly scared by the fact that Yuder was not accompanying them.

Upon finishing his business and returning, Yuder tried not to let his anxiety show as he relayed the same information to Micalin. Fortunately, whether his efforts paid off or not, the old mage didn’t find anything odd about his expression.

“Hmm. If there was another mission that needed attention, then it can’t be helped. But to venture back into the Great Sarain Forest with just a handful of people during this time… Are you sure it’s a good idea?”

“…It’s fine.”

Yuder’s eyes were darker than ever as he responded, as if engraving the promised three-day period into his mind.

“You certainly have unparalleled confidence in your abilities. I’m sorry I can’t be of much help, given our circumstances.”

“Your words alone are more than enough for me to feel gratitude.”

“Then let’s leave the details of our cooperation for when your group returns, and if you need anything before your group departs, feel free to ask the passing mages.”

Priest Lusan was slightly surprised by the fact that only he and Yuder were left while the others headed toward their destination. However, he quietly expressed gratitude towards Kishiar. For him, it was more rewarding to stay by the side of those who needed his

divine power than to laboriously move within the Great Sarain Forest.

“Let’s have a quick chat.”

During the brief preparation period before heading back into the Great Sarain Forest, Yuder followed Ejain, who had discreetly called him outside.

“I didn’t expect things to turn out this way.”

“… Yes, I didn’t either.”

While Yuder thought he knew Kishiar well - a man as unpredictable as a chameleon - he had only seen the man’s lively and gentle side in this lifetime, and thus, didn’t expect such a blow. After hearing Yuder’s response, Ejain fell into a brief silence, tilted his head, and asked in a soft voice.

“So, is this the last time we’ll see each other?”

“I suppose it is.”

“Life really makes it hard to predict even a step ahead. This situation made me realize that more than ever.”

“…”

“But for some reason, this time, it wasn’t entirely unpleasant. Perhaps because I’ve seen and heard many things in a short time that I hadn’t considered before.”

Taken aback by the unexpected statement, Yuder lifted his head towards Ejain. All he could see was a portion of the long silver hair that spilled from under the large hat, but he could nonetheless sense that Ejain’s voice had transformed into a surprising calm compared to a few days ago.

“However, contrary to your advice, what I learned was not from observing others. The true key, as always, lies beside the door.”

Puzzled by the cryptic statement, he lapsed into silence, but Ejain did not immediately offer any explanation.

“It’s a pity. I wanted to watch you a bit longer.”

“Thank you for your kind regard.”

“It’s not flattery. You’ve given me something even the best teachers could not.”

It seemed like a suggestion to learn how to keep good talent by observing Kishiar, but somehow the young prince’s conclusion seemed to return and settle again on an interest in Yuder.

“Please save those words for when you have truly obtained what you desire after your departure, and share them with those who follow you.”

“I wonder if that day will come. Do you think it’s really possible?”

The jocular, yet humorless question pierced his ears. Yuder imagined Ejain’s expression, hidden under the hat. Likely he was wearing the bitter expression he had seen by the well on that rainy night.

‘But something has definitely changed since then.’

The Ejain of that day seemed wrapped in self-loathing, without the inclination to observe his surroundings. But now, he seemed to have regained a leisurely state, longing purely for something other than power.

“Do you remember what I said to you before?”

“…”

“With the Cavalry, you will surely be able to return safely to where you wish. And then, one day, the opportunity you desire will certainly come. Please do not forget the words I’ve given you then.”

“The opportunity I desire.”

Ejain muttered quietly.

“A few days ago, I would’ve thought that opportunity would be absolute power or strength… Strangely enough, now, I don’t feel so good about thinking that way.”

Maybe that’s what he was trying to tell him. He still didn’t fully understand it, though.

The prince murmured such and looked up at the sky.

“If it’s alright, I’d like to consider you a close friend. Would you permit me?”

That was the most unexpected question he had heard since meeting Ejain in this lifetime.

In his previous life, he had wished to return something to the one who had given him a final opportunity in any way he could, but he had not expected to hear these words.

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Chapter 265

Even the shocking fact that Kishiar had decided to leave him behind momentarily vanished from his mind as he, Yuder, opened his mouth carefully.

“I feel I may not be someone fit to be your close friend… May I ask why you think otherwise?”

“The only way that occurred to me to forge a bond without a transaction was that.”

Prince Ejain responded concisely.

“You’re from the Empire, and you’ve no intention of leaving the Cavalry. If we part ways now and happen to meet again someday, you’ll likely not even bother to recognize me. Isn’t that so?”

He wanted to ask how he knew so much about him to make such a claim, but to be frank, Prince Ejain wasn’t wrong. He had no plans to leave the Cavalry, nor to bring up their current encounter should they meet again someday.

Watching Yuder respond in silence, Ejain let out a faint smile.

“There aren’t many relationships that can be formed and maintained despite differences in status, location, age, and everything else. A lover or a friend. That’s about it. I want to hold onto the hope that, after surviving and returning safely to my home country, I can casually resume our relationship when I meet you again someday. That’s why I’ve chosen to be friends. Does this answer your question?”

‘Hope.’

Yuder felt an odd sensation from the last word mentioned in his lengthy speech. Hope is an anticipation for the future. The future was the most valuable asset Yuder had reclaimed after living an entire life and coming back.

He vividly remembered the joy he felt at the moment he realized he'd reclaimed his future and hope. As his gaze wavered slightly, Ejain continued speaking.

"You taught me that you can't get what you want by staying as you are. If I've forced someone to change by making them feel destiny beyond luck, then I should share the responsibility."

'It doesn't seem like giving advice should imply responsibility…'

Anyway, it seemed like even Prince Ejain needed hope, no matter what form it took.

What remained for a prince who had lost all his followers and whose life was under threat was a slender hope for the future. Yuder knew he would make it, but he couldn't help thinking that the prince might need a concrete, new hope to keep moving forward.

'Yes. After all, I intended to help… For changing the future, maintaining a good relationship with Prince Ejain and Nelarn would be necessary.'

In truth, if it was revealed that he'd proposed to be friends with someone like Yuder, the one who stood to lose was unequivocally Prince Ejain. Aside from the somewhat peculiar Kishiar, most of the imperial family members and noble class only established such relationships out of necessity. Despite knowing this, the fact that the royal Ejain humbled himself to propose friendship to a common-born Cavalry member would undoubtedly make others think the prince had lost his mind.

'Like Kishiar…'

What if Ejain, who seemed to be changing in a slightly different direction than his past life, became a somewhat peculiar royal, showing similarities to Kishiar? Even if he may not be hailed as a perfect king as he was in his previous life, wouldn't it be better for him?

After a thin sigh, Yuder opened his mouth to answer the waiting prince.

"Understood."

"Really? You can't back down."

It was a relationship where he didn't know when he would see him again. What was this thing that kept him tethered? When Yuder nodded, a brighter smile than the one he had seen at first sight bloomed on Ejain's lips.

"I am delighted to have made a great friend. It is the best harvest I have acquired since coming to this Empire. In fact, even in Nelarn, I have never asked anyone to be my friend first. So, even if my approach is clumsy, I hope you, with many friends, will consider it."

It was a shocking thing to hear. It was the first time in two lives that he had been told he seemed to have many friends. He thought it was a joke, but Prince Ejain's expression felt sincere.

'Maybe I, as seen through others' eyes, have changed a lot from before…'

Swallowing a strange feeling of unfamiliarity with himself, Yuder observed Prince Ejain, who looked much happier than expected. It was a strange sight, someone wanting to be his friend and showing joy that it was accepted.

"I didn't know you would be so happy."

“Of course, I’m happy. I mentioned it considering the possibility that it might not work out until the end.”

“If I had refused till the end, would you have accepted it?”

“Hmm. At that time… I would have tried to take advantage of being a friend.”

‘Advantage?’

He wondered what that meant, but the next answer that flowed out was quite a spectacle.

“You know that one can’t be lovers alone, but friends can be?”

“Excuse me?”

“Even if you said no, you’re already my friend. If you had refused, I would have been a friend on my own.”

“What are you…”

Facing Yuder, who was speechless at what seemed like nonsense, Prince Ejain flashed a refreshing smile.

“If you ever come to Nelarn, make sure to find me. I will treat you with all the courtesies befitting a friend.”

“…Understood.”

He wondered if such a day would ever come, but for now, he replied affirmatively. Prince Ejain extended his hand with a peculiar expression.

“Then let’s shake hands one last time. We’re friends.”

“…”

Yuder slowly reached out and shook hands with Ejain. The tight grip and smiling lips felt entirely different from the emotionless face of the young King who had greeted the Commander of the Cavalry in his previous life.

Not long after, all the Cavalry members had finished their preparations and stood in front of the path to return to the Great Sarain Forest. From afar, the mages of the Western Mage Union were still busy with their site rebuilding, and Yuder watched the figures of his companions who he should be bidding farewell.

He felt like he could walk with them right now, but the fact that he had to let them go made him feel frustrated.

“Yuder. We’ll be back soon. Take care.”

“Don’t worry too much!”

The members, unaware of Yuder’s feelings, patted his shoulders with bright faces, but all that increased were unpleasant imaginations.

And finally, Kishiar stood in front of him. He sent a cold gaze toward the face hidden beneath the cloak and hat, and the attractive lips showed a difficult expression and slightly lifted.

“Hmm… I see you’re still not convinced.”

Of course not. Unless he suddenly became Kishiar, how could he genuinely accept this situation? It was excessive to ask for acceptance, though understanding why he had decided to leave him behind was possible.

When Yuder did not respond, the smile on Kishiar’s face deepened.

“But somehow… I find it rather pleasant to be worried about so sincerely.”

“…”

Yes, this was how Kishiar La Orr had always been. Yuder repeated this fact in his mind about ten times, suppressing the swell of emotions. It had been so long since he’d felt this way that it evoked memories of a time shortly after he’d joined the Cavalry in his previous life.

“So, my assistant finally seems his age. How adorable.”

“I haven’t done anything, but there must be many things you find cute.”

“Hahaha.”

Laughing, Kishiar slipped something into the pocket of Yuder’s overcoat and turned away.

“I’ll see you again in three days. Watch over Priest Lusan and the others well.”

Yuder put his hand in his pocket and lightly examined the object that had been inserted.

‘This is…’

The item that Kishiar had slipped in was none other than the candy he’d been forced to accept a few days ago. But this time, it wasn’t just one piece - there were three.

Yuder held his breath as he looked down at the three colorful candy wrappers rolling around in his palm, then up at the sky. He felt a mix of absurd emotions and a strange queasiness, as if he couldn’t maintain his composure unless he did so.

“Commander.”

The only man who could hear his whisper-like call turned his head in response. Yuder watched him quietly for a moment, then lowered his eyes.

“If you return even slightly injured, I will never listen to such an order again.”

“…”

“Please be careful.”

Kishiar’s face was obscured by his hat and his expression was unreadable. He stood still for a moment as if pricked by Yuder’s words. Only after someone else called out to him did he turn and follow his companions.

The densely grown trees of the Great Sarain Forest quickly swallowed their figures. Even after they had completely disappeared from view, Yuder remained in place for a long time.

Strictly speaking, he was not alone, yet strangely, his heart had grown cold. It was as if winter had come to him alone, a familiar yet disconcerting sensation.

Yuder realized a little late that this sensation was something he always used to harbor in his previous life.

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“You’re going to help with this? Can you do it?”

“Yes. It’s just a matter of rebuilding the roof, isn’t it?”

After his companions had left, Yuder began to help the mages repair the collapsed buildings. The mages, who had been half in doubt, were astounded at Yuder’s abilities.

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“How should we deal with this leaning pillar?”

“Ah. We planned to remove it, since straightening it seems difficult…”

“If you prefer to straighten it, I can make that happen.”

“Really?”

To someone who could harness the power of the earth, such a task was far from difficult. Yuder straightened the leaning pillar in no time, right in front of the astonished mage, driving it deeply back into the ground.

“Is there anything else to do?”

The mage, who had been staring at the now straight pillar, awkwardly nodded, his expression much softer than before.

“Ah… No. We’re finished here. If you still have energy, perhaps you should head that way…”

“Understood.”

Even without a word of thanks, Yuder turned around without a care, attracting varied emotional gazes from the mages. The news that Micalin, the leader, had misunderstood the Cavalry and decided to cooperate, and that the mages who had been brought to the base with the help of the Cavalry had accepted them, didn’t completely erase the residual hostility. However, Yuder made no forced attempts to mollify these feelings.

If people with friendly characters like Gakane and Kanna were here, they might have already become close. However, Yuder knew better than anyone that he could not be like them. He simply did what he could at the moment.

However, such demeanor surprisingly drew a not-so-bad response from the mages. His calm demeanor, despite having performed miracles single-handedly, was extremely peculiar and intriguing.

Constant, secretive glances filled with curiosity were thrown at the Cavalry member, who seemed like a drop of oil on water.

“Sir Aile. They say that the restoration of the magic circle is almost complete. We’re about to have dinner, would you like to join us?”

Yuder, who was about to bury the debris under the ground, looked up at the calling gaze. Lorna, the mage who had been with him from the village in the western border region, and her colleagues stood not far away. Looking around, it seemed that the other mages had already gone to have their meal.

“No, I’m good.”

“I understand that it may be difficult for you to eat since your companions have left, but starving isn’t good for your health. You’ve worked hard all day, let’s eat together.”

Another mage standing beside Lorna chimed in, his face full of resolve.

“That’s right. If the person who did the most work today goes hungry, it would be a disgrace to the name of the Western Mage Union.”

Yuder stared at their faces for a moment. It seemed like these mages had gathered here out of worry for him being left alone.

It wasn't that he had trouble eating since his companions had left, he just avoided joining the others because he knew it would cool the atmosphere during mealtime. However, the mages, who tried to look after him through their short bond formed from traversing the Great Sarain Forest together, didn't seem all that bad, despite the awkwardness.

"In that case… alright."

"That's great. You've made a good decision."

The mages' faces brightened up at Yuder's consent. They surrounded Yuder and headed to the place where the mages were dining. As soon as the other mages, who were eating their dry bread and soup with tired faces, saw him, they closed their mouths and fell silent. The gazes pouring on his face were unbearably sharp.

"Um… If you would remain here, we shall bring enough food for your party, Sir Aile. Would that be acceptable?"

"Yes."

The companions who had come with him, Lorna and the mages from the village, looked at Yuder with somewhat uncomfortable expressions, but he paid them no mind. After all, this was something he had expected since they decided to have a meal together. He sat down and nonchalantly bit into the bread the mages had brought for him. As Yuder continued to eat undisturbed, seemingly oblivious to their gazes, the mages gradually returned to their normal demeanor.

Only when the silence had been replaced by the sound of casual conversation did Lorna, who had been holding her breath in relief, cautiously speak to Yuder.

“You’ve really helped us a lot today. Wasn’t it exhausting?”

“It wasn’t too much.”

At Yuder’s comment about not handling ‘too much’ despite having done over half of the work alone, the mages exchanged glances.

“So… you’re saying it was just not… ‘too much’…”

Their words trailed off rapidly. However, the silence didn’t last long. One of the mages, who had been eating quietly for a while, eventually couldn’t contain his curiosity and asked Yuder a question.

“Sir, there’s something I’ve been curious about ever since we learned you guys are part of the Cavalry from the village. Can I ask you about it now?”

“If I can answer, I will.”

As soon as Yuder nodded, a flood of questions poured out.

“Do Awakeners typically possess power equivalent to yours or your companions?”

“When you use your power, it seems like there’s no need for preparation at all. What does it feel like to use it?”

“Exactly what abilities do you have and what can you do with them?”

Too many questions were asked for him to answer them all, but Yuder tried to respond as concisely as he could.

“The abilities we have vary greatly from one individual to another, so a direct comparison isn’t easy. But I believe that the things I have done today are well within the abilities of my comrades. Using power feels like energy is being drained from my entire body. There are even people who bleed from their noses if they overdo it. I can’t

explain all about my abilities, but according to the classification system within the Cavalry…”

Upon receiving answers, the mages’ faces brightened.

“I see. That’s truly fascinating.”

“It seems completely different from how we use magic.”

“If we go by what you say, doesn’t it rather resemble the original form of magic usage, as recorded in the ancient texts?”

As the mages started a heated discussion based on Yuder’s answers, other mages who had been secretly eavesdropping couldn’t resist subtly joining in.

“Um, can I ask something too?”

“…Go ahead.”

“Well, earlier, while we were cleaning up the debris…”

The barrage of questions continued even as the soup cooled and the bread hardened to the point of being inedible. If Lorna hadn’t noticed the sun had completely set outside the window and put a stop to it, Yuder would have had to answer their questions indefinitely.

“I’m sorry. Many of our mages can’t help but ask when they are curious… they don’t know when to stop.”

After finally escaping after a while, Lorna apologized to Yuder with a regretful expression.

“It’s okay. I’m somewhat used to the passionate nature of mages.”

He did think the young mages' enthusiasm was remarkable, but he wasn't tired or uncomfortable. Compared to what Thais Yulman had shown him in the Cavalry, this was nothing.

As he responded, Lorna's eyes widened, seemingly recalling something she had heard beside Micalin.

"Oh, that's right. You mentioned that Thais Yulman is currently in the Cavalry."

"Yes."

"When I quoted from the research records for my personal study, I referred to his papers quite a lot. But I've never met him in person. Have you seen him often, Sir Aile?"

Although he hadn't seen him every day, he had made regular visits with Kanna to see Thais, so he could say that they had met frequently. As Yuder gave a slight nod, Lorna's gaze swirled with curiosity and other emotions.

"Do you plan to help us out again tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"I see. Since we received so much help from you today, more than we could possibly articulate, we should try to assist you where you need it tomorrow."

Her statement held a somewhat suggestive undertone for something spoken simply out of gratitude. Upon Yuder's sharp glance, Lorna tilted her head slightly and smiled.

"Thanks to the swift completion of today's tasks, it seems we can return to the sites we've set aside for research tomorrow. Including the ruins."

Yuder did not miss the slight shift in Lorna's expression as she mentioned the 'ruins'.

"The leader also said to assist you in any way possible. Think about it and have a good rest."

Yuder watched her retreating figure before entering his lodgings. The quarters provided by the mages were the cleanest and most organized, apparently prepared with guests in mind.

There were two beds, one for each of them, but Priest Lusan was nowhere to be seen, likely still tending to the wounded. Rather than sit on the bed, Yuder walked towards the window, where darkness had fallen. Not far off, the sound of trees rustling in the wind, their leaves and branches moaning, filled the air.

The day had gone better than expected. The thought of possibly visiting the ruins the next day should have excited him, yet his heart remained as cold as the dark forest outside.

Could his comrades hear this cold and eerie sound as well?

If they could, where might they be listening from?

And what about Kishiar?

At the end of this thought, Yuder remained motionless for a long time.

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Chapter 267

The vast Great Sarain Forest was not confined to mere plains and trees, despite stretching so wide as to blur the boundaries of several nations. Within its expansive bounds lay not only mountains and rivers, but unexpected marshes and rocklands as well.

Until recently, those who traded by land, the merchants, mercenaries, and adventurers alike, traversed these paths. Among them were the Cavalry members who, following the faint trails of these former travelers, decided to spend the night in a colossal crevice in the rocks by a shallow stream, providing just enough shelter to rest their weary bodies.

Despite the overpowering scent of the dense forest that made their heads spin and the discomfort of resting on the cold, fireless ground, no one complained. Protected by their comrades, nestled safely at the most secure spot within their makeshift camp, Ejain dozed off. However, a sudden rustling sound pulled him from the depths of his slumber.

While the rest of the troop curled up soundly asleep in their places, one person was missing from his original spot - their Commander, Kishiar La Orr. Turning his head, Ejain noticed him standing a little distance away by the stream. Despite the danger lurking in the darkness of the unknown, the night sky reflecting off the streaming water, shrouded in countless twinkling stars, was overwhelmingly beautiful.

The man with golden locks, glowing in the soft, pale-blue hue of the moonlight and starlight that descended from that sky, seemed like a natural part of this surreal scenery. Unconsciously captivated by this ethereal sight, Ejain finally noticed, slightly belatedly, that a

small bird perched in the outstretched hand Kishiar pointed towards the sky.

‘A bird?’

Although it was difficult to see clearly due to the intertwining darkness and moonlight, it was evident that the bird was not perched on his finger, but rather half-lying in his palm. Through the gaps between Kishiar’s pale fingers, a sudden flash of red seemed to flicker.

Before Ejain could even contemplate the meaning of this sight, his body reflexively moved. As Ejain quickly rose, Kishiar gently covered the bird with his other hand, long strokes from its head to tail feather calming the small creature.

A moment later, Ejain, now standing on two feet, noticed the bird fluttering its small wings within Kishiar’s grasp. He had certainly thought he saw blood, yet the bird now seemed perfectly unharmed as if he was still dreaming.

‘Was I mistaken about it being injured?’

Though Ejain had been trained to remain calm in any situation, there were several times these past days when this was impossible. Now was one of those moments. While he blankly watched Kishiar and the bird, the man, gently caressing the bird’s head with his fingertip, turned his head.

“If you are awake, shall we talk for a moment?”

He spoke as if he knew all along that Ejain was awake, his words delivered in a whisper barely audible, yet piercingly clear.

Ejain, careful not to wake the others, stepped out to join Kishiar. Despite always looking down on others due to his high status, Ejain

did not feel the same in the presence of this noble. It felt as though he was back to his childhood.

The small bird in Kishiar's hand, noticing Ejain's approach, lit up its black, bean-like eyes and cocked its head. Tied to the bird's leg was a tiny pouch, used for carrying letters.

"A courier bird, then?"

"The following Peletta Knights brought letters for you," began Kishiar. "But their contents were rather unusual."

"…I wonder what they contained."

"Did a deceased servant ever present you with a lost hair tie, Prince? And, do you still possess it?"

Kishiar's question was abrupt, yet his face betrayed no hint of jest. Ejain studied his eyes for a moment, then quickly nodded his head.

"Yes, there was such an instance. I still have it, but why…"

"Apparently, it seems to carry a scent that someone might be tracking."

The explanation was brief, but it gave Ejain enough to surmise the circumstances. He immediately lowered his head, looking at his chest area.

"It seems new assassins are on their way. Assassins who track people through scent… I have a hunch about who sent them."

The face of the dead servant flickered in his mind. Biting his lip, Ejain reached into his pocket and pulled out the hair tie. It was a keepsake from his mother, something he'd never parted from since

he thought he'd lost it once. However, if it was indeed a cause for being tracked, he had to dispose of it naturally.

With a glance at the hair tie, Ejain was about to throw it into the stream without any hesitation. He would have done so if Kishiar's outstretched hand hadn't stopped him.

"…Why do you stop me?"

"If you discard something so precious that you've been carrying around, won't you regret it someday?"

"But what choice do I have? As it is…"

"Even if we kill them, other assassins will keep coming. You can't keep discarding things to live."

"What then, are you suggesting?"

In response to Ejain's question, Kishiar broke into a strange smile.

"Nothing."

"Excuse me?"

"You needn't do anything. They will never make it here anyway."

"What do you mean?"

Bemused by his response, the red pupils gazed somewhere beyond the forest.

"If they're following the scent, they'll follow exactly where you've been. Remember where we were last."

Ejain blinked, taking a moment to swallow.

‘The base where the mages stay…!’

Many mages who had been at the briefly visited base sprung to mind. The young priest who was attempting to heal them, and one other face left behind there passed through his mind.

The Cavalry member with a strange aura and black hair. The first friend he had ever made in his life, Ejain was taken aback as he recalled him.

Others he might not have minded, but he couldn’t allow that man to suffer due to him.

“Isn’t that an even bigger problem? They will be in danger there because of me. What can I… You need to send a message there quickly, don’t you?”

Despite Ejain’s dismay, Kishiar calmly shook his head.

“Even if we send word now, it will be too late.”

“Then please send someone there, anyone. Even if late, so they can have some help.”

“There’s no need.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“What I am saying is that, as long as the person we left there remains, there is absolutely no need to worry.”

Ejain stared in surprise at Kishiar.

He immediately knew who was being referred to as the person they had left behind. It was the very man, whom Ejain had just been worriedly anxious about.

“Don’t you worry about… him?”

Ejain asked hesitantly. On the way, he had seen enough of Yuder's abilities left at the base to have a rough idea of how formidable he was. However, he couldn't understand Kishiar's calm face, asserting that there was no need to worry, even knowing that the assassins trailing Ejain might raid the place.

"Of course, I'm worried."

"He's one of your valued subordinates, isn't he?"

"I value him greatly."

"Then why would you say you'll leave him and do nothing?"

Just by watching for a few days, Ejain knew how much Yuder was devoted to Kishiar. He'd seen the concern for his Commander and comrades behind Yuder's emotionless face, and had felt a profound envy that such a person was not at his side.

And yet, the one who received that absolute faith was planning to abandon him in a moment of danger?

Seeing Ejain's skeptical expression, Kishiar smiled.

"If I were to return there now, he wouldn't listen to me ever again."

"…"

"The one I left behind is someone I trust to handle things even when we have no means left from our side. What we need to do is to trust our backs to him and quickly move forward, not turn back for unnecessary reasons."

Ejain was lost for words, just looking at the man before him.

'Trust? …No, can it be called trust or faith, that thing?'

He felt the same emotion now as when he had been conversing with Yuder before. Something absolute, incomprehensible to him, seemed to stretch out, connecting the two men.

At first, he thought it was just deep loyalty. But now, looking into Kishiar's eyes, he got the feeling that maybe it wasn't just that.

"Anyway, since we have pursuers, we can't rest anymore. I will send the message back to the Peletta Knights. We should also move forward quickly. Are you okay physically?"

"I am, I'm fine."

Hearing Ejain's confused response, Kishiar smiled quietly.

"I'm glad."

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Chapter 268

Before waking up his companions for departure, Ejain had watched in silence for a while at the retreating figure of Kishiar who had put his cap back on and was sending out the messenger bird. He had contemplated several times whether or not to discard the hair tie he held in his hand, but in the end, he could not. It was because Kishiar's words kept echoing in his mind.

'You can't keep discarding things to live.'

It felt like a phrase that pierced through Ejain's entire life, as if it had observed him from his birth. To survive in an environment filled with enemies, he had been relentlessly casting away whatever he possessed if necessary. But no one had ever said such a thing to Ejain.

In the eyes of others, Ejain was a magnificent prince who served his people despite countless difficulties, and he was to become the King of Nelarn, a being who would save the world. Such an entity could not be swayed by human emotions. He believed he should not hold onto anything given that he was born as a prince, while there were still destitute people everywhere who possessed much less than him. His family's affection, his servants who were like friends, his mother's mementos, none of these were more precious than his life and the future of Nelarn. They couldn't be.

But today, for the first time, he heard a counter-argument that he could move forward without discarding precious things. It was a truly strange statement.

Kishiar La Orr was a being that had no congruence with any information Ejain originally knew. According to the data he had gathered before coming to the Empire, he heard that Kishiar was a

feeble body, fond of pleasures, and a symbol of the declining Empire, but the man before his eyes was entirely different.

Despite a seemingly pampered appearance as if he had lived the most luxurious life, he sat down on the dirty ground in the most casual manner, rested his body, and guarded his surroundings more vigilantly than anyone. The cool-headed judgment seen behind his seemingly playful attitude hinted that he had precise control over reason and emotion.

A self-control that felt cruel at times. But what should he conclude about feeling very human in some respects?

‘Does that inexplicable faith that the man demonstrated come from there?’

Ejain’s gaze shifted towards the sword sheath protruding slightly from the back of Kishiar’s cloak. He still vividly remembered the shock when he first drew that sword and obliterated a corner of the forest. The mages, who knew little about swords, might have been fooled by his display of swordsmanship as a power of the Awakener, but Ejain, who had fiercely grasped the sword to protect his body for a long time, didn’t fall for it.

Ejain did not know exactly what powers Kishiar La Orr possessed as an Awakener, but it was undoubtedly not related to swordsmanship. The swordsmanship he had shown so far was not an ability gained in a moment, but the result of constant training over a long period.

Weak and stupid? Who said that?

Until he faced Kishiar directly, Ejain thought that the changes occurring in the Empire were entirely due to Emperor Keilusa’s intention. He would not have decided to visit the Empire personally if he hadn’t sensed the positive ripple in the stagnant Orr Empire from

the rumors that spread across the continent related to the Cavalry. Ejain would have otherwise reached out to other places.

However, after meeting Kishiar and observing him, he felt the need to significantly revise his thinking. The changes occurring within the Empire were not solely the work of Emperor Keilusa. The fine gentleman before his eyes was, in fact, the Emperor's true right-hand man, his sword, and further, someone who shared his mind.

'The Duke of Peletta originally had no plans to come here, but suddenly changed his schedule. And he shows his power unabashedly throughout. It's because they possess the strength that can assure the future of my return and the consummation of the deal.'

Even though he had come to negotiate a deal, staking the Emperor and his future on it, Ejain was certain he wouldn't be too surprised even if he was to fail and die. But Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar seemed not to consider such a possibility.

Just a few years ago, many across the continent anticipated that the worn-out imperial family would soon end, and the corrupt dukes would seize power. Ejain also thought this judgment would not be wrong.

But what about now? Could he ever have guessed he would personally meet the Emperor and Kishiar in search for the possibility to secure his future?

Up until now, he had assumed that Duke Peletta lived much more comfortably than him. But now, he thought that perhaps the path the Duke had walked might not be so different from his own, or even possibly more challenging. What could a man capable of enduring for decades, diligently hiding his exceptional abilities, while feigning idiocy, desire?

Leading others was a tense and difficult path, a tightrope walk toward the future amidst enemies on all sides. Unlike Ejain, who was uncertain of the future, Kishiar showed no such anxiety in his broad and upright posture. It felt unnatural, and he wondered if he was overestimating Kishiar's abilities based on mere days of observation.

Was it just a delusion, or was he indeed a person capable of rewriting a chapter of history?

The words of Yuder Aile, that sounded like a prophecy telling him to think of the power he would gain in the future and what comes after, suddenly floated in his mind. Was this strange man before his eyes considering what he could accomplish with his own power and what would come after?

Pushing a carriage that's already moving to gain speed is easy. However, getting something that's been still for a long time to move again requires much more effort.

'If it's someone like him who's managed to hide his true power and form from the world for such a long time, there's nothing he can't do. Even if it's the difficult task of moving the decaying Empire.'

It was strange. Despite acknowledging his own status as the prince of Nelarn, the more he observed Yuder Aile, and faced Kishiar, who sent awe-inspiring trust, the more curious he became about their future.

The fact that it didn't feel negative was both curious and strange.

Ejain decided not to discard his mother's heirloom hair tie while watching the straight back of the man whose secrets he couldn't even begin to guess. And for the first time in a very long while, he thought about his own future that was not negative.

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As soon as day broke, the mages of the Western Mage Union began to move busily again. From outside the window, the sound of igniting the magic stones to complete the repair of the magic circle and set up a new formation could be heard.

In the end, Yuder had risen from his bed in the wee hours to search for Priest Lusan who had failed to return to his quarters all night. He found Lusan, curled up by the bedside of the most seriously injured patient, caught in a brief slumber.

“Priest Lusan.”

“Uh… hmm. Sir Yuder?”

Upon seeing Yuder’s face, Lusan forced his swollen eyes open and shot up from his position, startled.

“Oh, did I oversleep? My goodness. Dawn has already broken!”

Witnessing him immediately checking the patient’s condition, Yuder knew persuading him to return to his quarters for even a little rest would likely be fruitless. Impressed by his resilience, Yuder opened his mouth.

“While I understand your dedication, please do not skip meals. Those returning in three days would be quite dismayed to find you in such a pitiful state.”

“Of course. Are you well, Sir Yuder? I heard from the mages that you’ve been working tremendously hard all day yesterday.”

In reality, their reactions were more akin to shock or curiosity rather than admiration, but Lusan softened the truth. He was concerned that his words might potentially sap the spirits of the assistant of the Commander, who was left alone and ardently helping others. Yuder understood the meaning hidden in his words quite easily and responded with a small smile.

“I’m alright.”

“That’s good. Then let’s have breakfast together and again dedicate ourselves to our respective tasks here today. Ah, right. How is the condition of your spot? Let me check it before you go, and I’ll imbue you with some divine power.”

Yuder recalled the condition of the spot on his right hand that he had checked before leaving that morning. Although the spot had spread across the entire back of his hand due to strenuous use, its color was faint and there was no pain. He figured he probably didn’t need to ask the already exhausted Lusan for his divine power.

“No, I think it should be fine for now. I’ll ask for your help when I return.”

“Is that so? The intervals at which it appears seem to be increasing, and you said there’s no pain, so it looks like a positive change. But do come find me immediately if you need me. Sir Enon was quite worried about that spot of yours until the end.”

‘Enon?’

Yuder felt a slight sense of joy at hearing his name after such a long time. Despite his outward pretense of indifference, Enon was more affectionate than anyone Yuder knew.

“I understand.”

After eating together, they each went their separate ways. As soon as Yuder stepped outside, a group of mages who had spotted him from afar greeted him with faces that, while still slightly awkward, were much softer than they had been the day before.

“Hello. You’ve had breakfast, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Lorna over there was looking for you. She said to call you when you arrived. She’s working on restoring the magic circle.”

“I see.”

“And if you have some spare time… um… would it be alright to ask some more questions about things we didn’t cover yesterday? I’ve been so preoccupied, I couldn’t sleep properly last night.”

So they were that curious. Yuder slowly nodded at the mages who lowered their voices to ask. He didn’t see the mages clenching their fists and passionately lighting a fire of enthusiasm behind his passing back.

“Sir Aile, you’ve arrived. Have you given thought to what I mentioned yesterday?”

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“Sir Aile, you’ve arrived. Have you thought about what I told you yesterday?”

“Yes.”

Lorna, greeting Yuder a bit away from the mages busy reconstructing the shattered defensive barrier, lowered her voice as she surveyed the surroundings.

“What will you do? Would you like to join me today to see the ruins and other places? Or will you wait until all your companions return?”

“If it’s okay, I’d like to go today.”

It was an obvious choice, without room for hesitation. Upon hearing Yuder’s answer, Lorna nodded in affirmation as if she had expected it, subtly surveying their surroundings.

“I thought you might say that. Please, follow me.”

Thanks to Yuder’s help with the mages all day yesterday, the atmosphere had considerably softened. However, if they found out he was joining her to the ruins, someone might suddenly object. As a result, Lorna took advantage of the others’ busiest time to move, avoiding their attention.

“We’ll need to join the others, but they’re all people who’ve come from the village together, so you won’t feel too burdened.”

As she said this, two familiar mages waited behind a half-collapsed building.

“Ah, hello. When Lorna mentioned you might come along, we weren’t sure, but you’re really here. Did you rest well yesterday…?”

“Yes. Thanks to you.”

Though the mages, who had fully experienced Yuder’s Cavalry strength on the journey, didn’t express their joy openly, their eyes revealed their relief at Yuder’s participation. They soon began moving along a narrow path behind the collapsed building. The path wasn’t naturally formed but had been crafted by felling trees and leveling the ground.

“It was fortunate that despite the numerous barriers breaking yesterday, a considerable number of barriers protecting this path remain intact. Of course, if monsters cause a disturbance like yesterday, it won’t be much use.”

Lorna, holding an offensive magic tool in her hand, spoke quietly. Her gaze was constantly surveying their surroundings.

“Exactly which places were you planning to visit today?”

“Five warehouses, the control points for the main barriers and amplifying barriers protecting the ruins, and Magic Spring Ruins… roughly these.”

“That’s quite a bit. Will you be able to check all of them by today?”

“That’s why we need to hurry. Due to the monsters, I’m assuming quite a few of your barriers also got broken. We need to quickly assess the damage.”

Just imagining the tenacity of the mages who, despite the rampant growth of the Great Sarain Forest that threatened to consume everything if neglected even a little, managed to maintain so many facilities, was overwhelming. As they walked, Yuder

meticulously scanned the visible surroundings, recording the topography in his mind.

‘This is a place with drastic changes in terrain. I can’t see well because of the trees, but there seem to be many precipices that one could tumble down with just a slight misstep.’

“Is the path too rugged?”

One of the other mages, guessing why Yuder was looking around so much, awkwardly started a conversation.

“No. But did you create this path because there was a need for a shortcut?”

“No. Most of the flat paths around here are being used as trade routes and we would need permission from others to use them. If it were just for short-term round trips by merchants or mercenaries, it would be fine, but we stay here for a long time and didn’t want to pay usage fees, so we just blazed a new trail.”

The mage, who had responded, spoke with tremendous pride.

“Even when it’s hard, it’s best when the heart is at ease. Our local mages are probably the strongest among all mages on the continent.”

The implication of needing others’ consent to use a well-paved road was tantamount to them being deeply involved in the overland trade occurring within the vast jungle.

There were many who made a fortune by providing their well-maintained trade routes to others and receiving a certain commission, but if they had been so stingy towards the mages who had helped others for such a long time, even during the periods of massive monster outbreaks in the west, that was a separate issue.

‘Being so stingy they’re shaking their teeth, indeed… now it makes sense why they aren’t on good terms.’

“The guys from the Tain Family. It’s such a relief that I haven’t seen their usual noisy behavior of controlling the roads severely for months, stating they were starting a new business and creating new trade bases.”

“Right. There were many rumors that they were making such a fuss not for normal items, but something dangerous. With the monster outbreaks, the monsters must have drank a lot of water because of the abnormality, so that’s a good thing.”

Thinking about the long-standing symbiotic relationship between the Tain Family and the Western Mage Union, Yuder suddenly turned his head at a comment he couldn’t easily ignore.

“A dangerous item… What kind of item do you mean?”

As Yuder seriously responded to a thoughtlessly blurted-out comment, the mages made a surprised expression, and soon poured out the rumors they had each heard.

“Um, well, I’m not sure. There were rumors that they were creating a route to smuggle in raw materials for expensive drugs that nobles often use, and also, what was it?”

“Human trafficking.”

“Ah, yes. In the large cities of the South, aren’t illegal betting fight arenas where random opponents fight each other becoming popular? There was a talk that they were running out of people to put up for that, and they were bringing them from other countries. They said that was making a lot of money. So there was a rumor that the Tain Family was also trying to get involved in that.”

The mages failed to notice the gradual darkening of Yuder's eyes upon hearing this.

'Human trafficking?'

There was such an incident in his past life. Shortly after Emperor Katchian ascended the throne, all kinds of crimes, including human trafficking, raged out of control as illegal fighting arenas became popular among the dissolute nobles. Eventually, Yuder had to suppress them as the Commander of the Cavalry. Many noble families were involved in the event, lost their property, and Emperor Katchian gained considerable fame thanks to that.

'But that was later than now. According to the investigation at the time, the Tain Family was not involved.'

Lost in his thoughts for a moment, Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

"It would be a terrifying matter if true… But moving ordinary people through the vast jungle isn't easy. It's a hard rumor to believe."

"That's understandable. We thought the same. But for about a year, there have been quite a few rumors among merchants and mercenaries about witnessing very ordinary-looking strangers in the jungle."

"Even among our Western Mage Union, there were some who claimed to have seen them. It was dismissed as a hallucination because it seemed so unbelievable."

Yuder's mind was tangled upon hearing the mages' words.

'It's not a crack in the air, but a person…'

If the witnesses were not only the mages who mostly stayed near the bases or ruins, but also the merchants and mercenaries roaming the entire Great Sarain Forest, then the chances that this was no mere rumor were quite high. Could it truly imply that they'd partaken in the forbidden trade of this era, or that they had intended to?

'…It's not impossible, I suppose…'

"Over there, you can see the first warehouse."

Before the thought was concluded, Lorna, who had been leading the way, turned and pointed to a certain place. Just as she said, a warehouse sprang up suddenly in the forest. The mages quickly tucked away their interest in rumors and swiftly approached, scanning the surroundings.

"Huh, looks like those bastards haven't made it here yet. It's intact."

"There's not a single broken defense spell."

"Good. Let's move on to the next warehouse."

Fortunately, the warehouses, said to be arranged in a circle around the center of the Magic Spring and the magic circle, were mostly intact. But the mages, heading joyously towards the point where they could control the magic circle, were soon to realize that life was not always accompanied by luck.

"All the major defensive spells here are a mess… How about there?"

"It's worse here. It seems that more than half of the amplification circle is broken."

The mages moved around the massive magic circles drawn with magic stones, avoiding the broken ground and fallen trees. To Yuder,

it was not clear how badly the situation was damaged, but the mages couldn’t hide their shocked expressions, as if this place looked even more dreadful than any other disaster scene.

“We had just started to see a reaction from the magic power in the vicinity of the ruins on the amplification circle… What should we do if all this turned out to be futile?”

“Don’t despair before you’ve even seen it. We need to go and assess the situation first.”

“But look over there. The trail of monsters who broke the circle leads to the ruins…”

The eyes of a mage filled with minor fear were directed towards the forest, where the massive claw marks disappeared.

“It’s too dangerous. We should report back about this and return only after the base restoration is fully completed.”

“The monsters are likely gone from the ruins, leaving only their traces! If we retreat now, who knows when we’ll have the leisure to return and examine it leisurely.”

Yuder squinted his eyes and heightened his senses while the mages debated. He focused on sensing any signs from the direction where the monster tracks disappeared, but he felt nothing in particular.

‘I don’t know how far away those ruins are, but for now, there are no immediate threats. But it’s not a bad thing to prioritize safety.’

“…Those who want to go back can return first and report. I will take responsibility and check the ruins myself.”

At that moment, Lorna made a decision amongst the mages. Everyone else, it seemed, had decided that their lives were more

valuable. Yuder squeezed himself in between the mages and spoke.

“I will accompany you.”

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“I’ll go with you.”

“Are you sure you’ll be alright? It’s a relief for us to have your help, but sending just Lorna alone would be…”

“If anything feels dangerous, you must return immediately.”

With a sigh of relief yet faces that still held a trace of uneasiness, the mages retreated.

Lorna also glanced at Yuder with a similar expression, before quickly moving forward with a stern look.

“Understood. Let’s go.”

The ruins weren’t far from the magic circle, marked with traces of monsters. Lorna circled the vicinity, noting claw marks that seemed to disappear in another direction, her voice dropping to a hushed whisper.

“There are many mechanisms set up around the ruins to prevent intrusion. Fortunately, it seems like they’ve worked. We’ll need to disable them to get in. Please wait a moment.”

She stretched out her hand, touching a spot in the air. Following that, the atmosphere around Lorna’s fingertips began to glow faintly, a departure from its previous state. Although invisible to the eye, it seemed as if magic was being manipulated.

After much effort, Lorna finally completed her task. A moment later, the scenery in the empty air rippled like a mirage, revealing a different image. It wasn’t the familiar forest they had grown tired of seeing. The first thing to catch Yuder’s eye was an open area where

gigantic formations were drawn all over using magic stones and all sorts of tools, and a small guard post set up next to it.

“That’s the presumed Magic Spring our Western Mage Union has been studying all this time. I think it’s been at least a year since the last outsider entered here.”

Lorna, catching her breath, pointed to a location. There were several rocks piled together that seemed to have been there for a long time.

‘…they just look like regular rocks.’

To be honest, the place didn’t resemble anything Yuder had faintly imagined. There was no visible water despite being named a ‘spring’, and there were no fences or walls to distinguish the area.

Anticipating Yuder’s doubts, Lorna gestured.

“Take a closer look. Ordinary people might not understand why it’s called a spring, but as an Awakener, you might comprehend without an explanation.”

Yuder slowly walked forward. As he neared the rocks, the magic power from the intrusion prevention spells tingled his skin. He tried not to trigger them as he stood in front of the rocks, but still saw nothing special.

“What’s important is what’s inside those overlapping rocks.”

What could possibly be within these common-looking rocks, piled on top of each other, that has captivated so many people for so long?

As he reached out to touch them, an invisible force seemed to suddenly surge from the dark crevice. He instinctively stepped back,

and the surging sensation vanished as quickly as it appeared. There was nothing to see.

‘…’

What was that just now?

Yuder squinted at the rock and carefully extended his hand once more. This time, even though he felt the same sensation, he didn’t withdraw. As if responding to his action, the unseen force didn’t disappear but began to gush out toward the outside.

‘Could that be… magic?’

The formless energy that had burst forth from the rock crevice disappeared as soon as Yuder withdrew his hand. He repeated this action several times and realized that magical energy bubbled forth from inside the crevice whenever he approached it within a certain range.

The energy felt similar, yet distinct, to that sensed when ordinary mages cast magic. Invisible to the eye but exceedingly dense and vivid, one could feel its presence without concentrating specifically on it. It seemed closer to the energy that Awakeners released when they exerted their power than it did to magical energy.

“Do you see it?”

“Is this… magic power?”

“Indeed. To be precise, it is concentrated magic power almost equivalent to ancient magic. Now you understand why we named it the Magic Spring?”

Lorna beamed with a proud face.

“The legendary Archmage Luma and the early mages drew their power from a never-ending source of magic, the Magic Spring. I believe that the spring existed in a form similar to this. In a place filled with such dense magic, they must have discovered the true power of magic.”

“…”

“The crevice is like the lid of a purse filled to the brim with cream, which in this case is magic power. As you approach, magic power scatters around as if you’ve squeezed the purse. We suspect that this place may have existed even before this Great Sarain Forest came into being. It’s a living relic.”

With her young eyes filled with ardent desire, Lorna continued looking at the rock crevice.

“It’s not the quantity of magic power stored within that’s important, but rather its concentration. The only place where such pure and dense magic power remains throughout the entire continent is likely here. If we can find a way to amplify and utilize it, I believe we can resolve the chronic shortage of magic power we’re experiencing, along with the problems arising from it.”

Lorna said that the mages of the Western Mage Union were very carefully researching it, casting spells to trap the magic power within so it wouldn’t deplete too quickly. Yuder felt as if he was finally beginning to understand the stories that had previously been hard to grasp, even though Kishiar had explained them quite simply.

‘There hasn’t been any progress in the research for a long time, and even the Pearl Tower had given up hope. But recently, changes have started to occur… What could have sparked these changes?’

The rock crevice, from which the magic power flowed, was incredibly dense and dark, as if filled with shadow. Yuder frowned

slightly as he observed the large and small magic circles densely surrounding it.

“When I heard about it before, it seemed you mentioned that changes in the spring only started recently… May I ask what changes have begun?”

“Hmm… I remember the changes started with the concentration of the magic power flowing out becoming increasingly dense after the completion of the 99-fold amplification magic circle that encompasses this whole area.”

Lorna answered obediently.

“In fact, there was no amplification circle here when this research first started. We just believed that by understanding the difference between the concentrated magic power here and the ordinary magic power that exists in the current world, we would find the answer.”

However, after a mage suggested installing an amplification circle, the mages of the Western Mage Union debated for a long time. Installation of an amplification circle required more money and time than a simple defensive circle. The long debate between those arguing that it was better to focus on other methods and those claiming that installing an amplification circle could be the answer to the changes eventually ended in favor of installation.

And the moment the amplification circle, which had taken a long time to set up, was complete, surprisingly, the magic power that was flowing from the crevices of the rocks began to show a much higher concentration than before.

“Although the amplification circle we were controlling is now half-broken, it doesn’t seem like the damage is severe. We’ll have to repair it and reinstall it soon.”

Yuder was lost in thought, alternatively looking at Lorna's bright face, the source of magic power, and the magic circle surrounding it.

'Just by looking at it, it seems like the strange crack and the source of magic power have no correlation. But the fact that the crack was continuously witnessed here implies that there must be some connection…'

No matter how much he thought about magic, it was hard to find an answer. The absence of Kishiar was never more keenly felt and missed. Yuder looked around as if a crack might appear at any moment, then sighed quietly and opened his mouth.

"Did you, Miss Lorna, happen to see a crack here too?"

"Hmm, are you talking about that strange crack in the air we saw yesterday? I haven't seen it. Since I've been here, I've only looked at the spring, so I didn't have a chance to look elsewhere."

"I see."

"You came here to find that connection, but it must be disappointing that there's nothing today."

"Not at all. I'm grateful just to have been invited here."

At Yuder's neat reply, Lorna flashed a slightly different smile than before.

"Sir Yuder, you seem to possess a truly amazing ability. Honestly, I didn't expect someone who's not a mage to be able to see magic in such a short time. I don't know if all Awakeners are like that though."

"I didn't know that myself."

"You seem to adapt remarkably well to magic. I wonder what it would have been like if you had received a magic response test

when you were a child. Have you ever taken one?”

“No.”

A magic response test? His life was busy enough just running around the mountains, cutting down trees, and digging up edible grasses every day. Hearing Yuder’s answer, Lorna covered her mouth with her hand and chuckled softly.

“Every year, countless children take that detection test hoping to become a mage, but most of them can’t even see a thread of magic. Perhaps we missed out on a potential great mage named Yuder.”

“That’s too generous of you.”

While brushing off her compliments, Yuder thought it would be better to come back another time with his comrades. However, as he was about to turn away, something caught his eye.

‘…Wait a moment. The slight shadow in the crevice where the magic power is flowing… Isn’t that a bit odd?’

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When he first saw it, he was so startled by the magic power gushing out from the crevice that he didn't really focus on it. But as he conversed with Lorna, a fleeting glance towards that spot instilled a strange sensation within him.

'Too dense and dark. Was it like this before?'

While shadows were inherently dark and dense, there was something distinctly different about this one. As he squinted, worried it might be a sign of a crack, Lorna called him in a puzzled voice.

"Sir Aile? You seem to have seen all there is to see. Is there something strange?"

"That shadow in the crevice… Hasn't it become a little strange?"

"Pardon?"

Lorna narrowed her eyes, a look of concentration on her face.

"Um…. Exactly what seems strange? It seems to be the same as before."

"…"

Yuder was unable to answer. Even when asked what was strange, he had no precise words to describe it. Lorna, who had been waiting for an answer, sighed and patted Yuder's shoulder.

"It seems you are excessively worried about a potential crack-related issue. Today isn't the only day. You can come back tomorrow and check again. Let's just go back now."

“Will you be back tomorrow?”

“Of course. I will keep coming here to check as long as I’m fine. I cannot let this place be damaged, even if other places might be.”

After packing the co-shared journal of the mages left in the guard post, Lorna closed the protective magic circle that covered the Magic Spring. Yuder stared at the Magic Spring, gradually fading like a mirage, while she struggled to move her magic power.

“Do you always have to open and close the formation to go in there?”

“Yes. If we don’t, it might be invaded by others or monsters. But I’m worried, the central control formation has been weakened too much due to damage. I need to repair it soon, but I’m not sure if I have the strength…”

After closing the formation, Lorna claimed that she had almost exhausted the day’s accumulated magic power. Since becoming a mage in her childhood and undergoing consistent training for many years, she was one of many mages who struggled to move even a single formation, which was a common occurrence in this world.

‘Magic power deficiency.’

Yuder pondered on a problem he had never seriously considered before.

To become a mage, one had to be born with the talent to sense magic power, but among those selected, only a few could cast attribute magic. Even fewer could perform powerful attack or defense magic, and those who could do so received treatment no less than high nobility, regardless of their commoner origins. This was why magic tools, which could use engraved magic with a slight amount of magic power, were increasingly popular.

Yuder had always thought it was natural that the magic the present-day mages could perform was less potent than the miracles said to have been performed by legendary Archmages. After all, legends typically exaggerated reality.

But they sincerely believed they could bridge this gap. Yuder recalled the emotions that flickered across Lorna's face when she smiled, asking him if he had ever undergone a magic power responsiveness test and inundating him with questions about his powers, similar to attribute magic.

'Envy… or perhaps resentment.'

It was a feeling he knew all too well from his previous life, frequently directed at him by others. Despite knowing that magic and the abilities of the Awakeners were different powers, they still envied Yuder.

Lorna had proclaimed that through her research, she would solve the issue of magic power deficiency. If that was indeed the case, what would they gain? No matter how much he pondered, there was only one answer.

'Power.'

The ultimate objective of the research, the one many were willing to stake their lives on, inevitably culminated in power. The strange sensation that this seemed so obvious yet perplexing was because he knew how far humans desiring power could go in recklessness.

Yuder cast a fleeting glance back at the Magic Spring Ruins that he had left behind.

'It should have been Kishiar here, not me.'

If that were the case, Kishiar would have better understood this strange feeling that he had, and would have gained much more

information while looking at the Magic Spring. But no matter how much he regretted it, he couldn’t change the reality that he was alone.

Yuder put his hand into his pocket. He felt a little relief as he sensed the clinking of the hard, round candies inside. As he slowly fumbled with them, he resumed walking, leaving the ruins behind.

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Lorna and Yuder did not encounter any monsters on their return. Lorna reported the results of their expedition to Union Leader Micalin, who gave his consent for Yuder to accompany Lorna to examine the ruins and their surroundings once a day.

Just like the day before, Yuder spent the rest of the day helping the mages. The number of mages watching him work had increased compared to the day before. His guard was noticeably down compared to before, even when mages came right up to him to ask questions.

The day in the Great Sarain Forest ended earlier than elsewhere. Because of the dense trees, it grew dark as soon as the sun began to set. Even after all the mages had gone back, Yuder stayed out for a long time, surveying the surroundings. He alternated between the desire to dash into the seemingly empty forest immediately and the cold logic that he should stay where he was.

“…”

As time passed, the shadows grew longer. Only when they blended into the darkness, becoming indistinguishable, did Yuder move his hand to take out a candy from his pocket. The sweet taste that filled his mouth as he unwrapped the slightly worn paper and put the candy in his mouth was familiar.

‘What the heck am I doing?’

There were hardly any times in his life when he had wasted time so aimlessly.

With a shake of his head, Yuder returned to his quarters. He didn't feel like eating dinner, so he decided to skip it. Today, too, Lusan seemed to be sleeping by the side of the injured, for his bed was empty. Yuder sat on the bed and looked outside. He hadn't noticed when he was with the others, but now that he was alone, he felt unusually on edge due to the sound of the wind coming from the darkness.

'It feels as if someone is watching.'

It seemed like it was just his imagination, but he could never be too sure. He kept his sword, usually left by the side of his bed, close to his body and closed his eyes.

Then, an unpleasant dream overwhelmed him.

Someone seized his arm and yanked him back harshly.

At the same time, a giant tail brushed past his face and crashed into the cliff. With a loud bang, a part of the mountain shattered, and screams echoed from all directions. The overpowering smell of blood made him so dizzy that he could barely stand.

Yuder exhaled heavily, glancing sideways. The one who had grabbed his arm, propelling him backward with surprising speed to avoid the monster, opened their lips, his face furrowed in a frown.

"Be careful."

"…"

He didn't bother to ask when they had arrived, nor did he offer thanks for his assistance. The other wouldn't expect such, anyway.

Kishiar, looking paler than usual, released Yuder's arm and scanned him briefly. His gaze lingered a few times on Yuder's dust-covered face and abdomen, grazed and bleeding from an encounter with the monster.

Before Kishiar could comment on his injuries, Yuder forcibly shifted his gaze and asked a question befitting of his Deputy Commander status.

"I've never seen a monster that big before. I can't begin to guess where it came from."

"The first sighting was near Great Sarain Forest."

Kishiar responded quietly.

"They say it wasn't that big then, but it has been growing larger day by day, to the size it is now."

"Can it really grow that much in such a short time?"

"We only know a fraction about monsters. It's possible that some could have such strange growth patterns."

Wasn't the creature before them the most solid evidence of that? Suddenly, the blood on his frowning face caught his eye. It was a fresh wound, likely caused by a sharp spike on the creature's tail as Kishiar pulled Yuder away.

The monster, as large as a small mountain, was bigger and stronger than any monster they had encountered so far on the Cavalry western subjugation mission. Moans of injured members echoed around them, but the number of collapsed piles of stone made it almost impossible to locate them.

A catastrophe. Yuder suddenly thought, gazing up at the bellowing monster that shook the sky.

There would be no reason for such a monster to appear unless the world was on the brink of destruction. If they did not retreat from here, it was likely that all the Cavalry members here would die or suffer equivalent casualties.

They had fought back, trying to squeeze out every ounce of their strength that wasn't directly flowing to topple a mountain, yet the monster, thought to be shattered and dead, rose again, even bigger than before, scattering its massive roar. The landscape of the entire west seemed to be changing at this rate.

In such a situation, what use could Kishiar be, even if he were here? Yuder acknowledged that his power was stronger than it appeared, but such a gigantic creature would be hard for even Kishiar to strike.

It might be too late to retreat now, but if the precious imperial family member were to die here, it would become an even bigger problem. Not that life could get much worse when one was constantly being criticized… Yuder sighed and opened his mouth towards him.

"The situation isn't looking good. Perhaps it would be better for the Commander to withdraw first."

"Are you telling me to leave just after I arrived?"

"Aren't you here to avoid death? In any case, I'll buy some time. Lead the other members and retreat."

Yuder expected him to agree, but there was no response. When he turned his head, he was surprised to read a rare emotion on Kishiar's pale, distorted face as he looked at him.

"I didn't come here to back down."

He could feel a cold flame in his voice.

“You should retreat, Yuder Aile.”

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“Step back, Yuder Aile.”

Even before hearing his response, Kishiar moved forward. Watching his retreating figure, Yuder’s eyes trembled with questions and sharpness. In that moment, he suddenly realized that this situation was a mere memory of the past.

Ah, that was it. This was a memory of a particularly striking day during the tremendous battles fought while subjugating the Western monsters. Unlike the usual monsters that would inevitably die when falling from a great height or being crushed by a collapsing mountain, there was one monster that peculiarly grew larger with each attack it received.

In the future, many had tried to kill this monster, named Pethuamet after the name of a demon, but their efforts yielded little result. Yuder, too, had exerted tremendous effort to kill the creature, almost collapsing an entire mountain in the process, but the monster survived, growing even larger.

Had things remained as they were, he might have failed his mission for the second time, or even died.

Just like the scenery before him, Kishiar appeared.

He was unarmed. His white Commander’s uniform was stained with dirt, and his hands, protected only by long gloves, lacked any form of weaponry. Yet, even before the monstrous howl that could knock one unconscious, he stood firm and alone.

In the dream, Yuder clenched his fists, readying for battle at any moment, and frowned deeply as he observed the scene. Up until then, Yuder had assumed that even if it were Kishiar, he could not

confront the monster alone. After all, most of the time, Kishiar would retreat and take command rather than exerting his own strength. The monsters Kishiar personally dealt with were usually taken care of out of necessity during dire situations, and it didn't seem that daunting or challenging.

However, that probably changed that day. After seeing the events caused by Kishiar, who, without a single weapon, boldly approached the massive monster, Yuder lost his confidence in defeating him.

'…'

With just a swing of his arm, without any particular preparatory movement, an enormous sound tore through the air. The monster, taken aback by the unexpected attack, lost its footing. As it howled and fell backward, a huge cloud of dust obscured the view, like a mountain collapsing.

Thinking that Kishiar was swallowed up by the dust storm, Yuder was about to rush forward when a white shadow briefly revealed itself, leaping upward. A cold, crimson gaze pierced relentlessly from beneath the fluttering white hem of his robe. Yuder, unknowingly, halted in his tracks.

Then, a tremendous battle ensued, one that could be a page in an ancient chronicle.

The monster howled in rage at the small human who dared to attack it. Its purple body swelled and a burning substance poured out, spreading through the smoke and melting the ground and rocks it touched. Its spiked tail and the long claws on its four legs easily shattered the solid mountain as though it were soft soil.

Even with the sight alone leaving most rooted to the spot, unable to move, Kishiar bravely held his ground. The Cavalry members present that day could barely grasp Kishiar's movements. Young Yuder, his eye for the flow of power not yet as sharp due to lack of

experience, was no different from the rest. The fight unfolded so swiftly that they could barely see more than afterimages, preventing anyone from aiding him haphazardly.

Yet, because this was a dream, Yuder could somewhat clearly discern Kishiar’s movements better than his memory served him.

Kishiar dodged the onslaught of attacks aimed at him with astounding speed, as if he had wings. Even with the simplest strikes, he managed to crumble the tough bodies of the monsters or playfully dodged around them, leaving them wobbling. His speed and power were so relentless that it seemed as though he was manipulating and repelling the bodies of the monsters even before they made contact.

Swinging, kicking, extending his arms - these were the basic moves of martial arts. But none could move as lightly, heavily, restrained, and yet freely as he did.

One moment he’d be here, rolling and stretching his body somewhere else; the next, he’d leap into the air and fall like an arrow from the sky in the blink of an eye.

As time passed, the body of the monster unable to withstand his attacks began to rip apart. While it bulged and swelled in an attempt to regenerate, Kishiar’s attacks were faster. The clothes on Kishiar’s body gradually became tattered, but his speed did not decrease at all.

Those gathered there lost themselves in the spectacle, forgetting even their own safety. They couldn’t fully grasp how he was moving, but there was a simple, beautiful strength in Kishiar’s display. Despite engaging in a primitive hand-to-hand combat with no weapons, the trajectory of his movements was surprisingly elegant. It was a compelling power that could captivate and pull at the heart of any human watching…

However, Yuder remembered how that battle ended. When the monster, dazed from the relentless beating from Kishiar, mindlessly chased after him, Kishiar lured it towards the cliff that Yuder had earlier collapsed.

“It’s no use! I’ve already thrown it down there once, and it climbed back up, twice as big!”

No matter how much he yelled, Kishiar seemed not to hear him and continued to distance himself. Yuder, seeing the monster with half its limbs cut off still stubbornly crawling after Kishiar, turned his body. He shouted with all his might to the Cavalry members who might be listening somewhere.

“Now’s our chance to move. Retreat quickly!”

And then, he ran frantically in the direction Kishiar and the monster had gone. Beyond the collapsed forest, he saw the monster moving forward with a roar and the white shadow that continued to draw its attention.

“What on earth is he doing alone….”

He wanted to move faster, but his body wouldn’t cooperate. It was because of the blood slowly seeping from his stomach. Yuder clenched his teeth and summoned the power of the wind. As he jumped off it, the jumbled stones, broken trees, and mixed soil quickly fell away behind him.

“Damn.”

Hearing his own grumbled curse, Yuder found his past self strange. He didn’t know that he had chased after them so frantically without even taking care of his body. Was this what actually happened, or was this an exaggerated spectacle because it was a dream?

“Commander!”

At Yuder’s shout, Kishiar who had just reached the edge of the crumbling cliff, halted momentarily. However, without any hesitation, he jumped into the air. With a full turn of his body, he soared precisely to the vicinity of the monster’s head, extending his arm for the final blow towards its wounded face.

An energy, like a mirage, flickered mightily near Kishiar’s hand and a horrifying scream vibrated the entire mountain. Black blood spurted from the monster’s face and splattered up to where Yuder stood, a large chunk rolling towards his feet. It was the monster’s tongue.

The half-protruded, thick, long mass of flesh wriggled like a snake while a peculiar line of blue light intermittently blinked on its surface. Uncertain if it was an illusion, it resembled a fragment of a magic circle. The shape felt oddly familiar, but he couldn’t quite recall.

However, Yuder didn’t have the time to dwell on this. The moment he turned his head, he saw the monster at the edge of the distant precipice, swaying as if it had lost its strength. Half of its face was blown off - either the attack hit its weak spot perfectly, or there was no further attack.

Moments later, the monster growled lowly and tumbled down the cliff. The cliff, sharp and peculiarly shaped as if precisely split in half vertically from the mountaintop, was a trap Yuder had set to kill the beast.

The entire ground shook with a thunderous noise, filling his ears with a deafening roar that rendered him dazed.

Unable to withstand the massive shock, the ground cracked and shuddered violently. The impact seemed to ripple towards the very edge of the cliff where the monster had been standing, causing it to

crack again. Yuder quickly retreated, but Kishiar, who appeared fatigued, remained still.

“Commander!”

He called out again, but this time there was no response. Was he overly exhausted, or was he injured to the point he couldn’t move? From this distance, it was hard to tell.

Finally, as the ground around Kishiar began to crumble, his blood and dust stained white coat swayed as if about to plunge down the cliff. In that split second, Yuder examined the tree and solid ground he had held onto for safety. He was safe here. As long as he was in this spot, he wouldn’t be harmed. If Kishiar still had the strength he just demonstrated, a single leap should be enough to return here.

However, knowing this, after a brief passage of time, he let go of the tree he was gripping tightly.

The moment he stepped on the wind and jumped, the spot where Kishiar had been standing too began to fragment and collapse. By a hair’s breadth, Yuder reached out and tightly grabbed the hem of the white coat. He couldn’t fully embrace the blood-soaked body collapsing from exhaustion, but catching it was enough for now.

The face he managed to see was soaked with blood flowing from the nose, mouth, and ears, causing the golden hair covering his closed eyes to appear red.

With the last of his strength, Yuder summoned the power of the wind and wrapped it around both of their bodies. The violent wind flapped wildly, creating a long tail-like trajectory behind them. The two became one, endlessly falling down the mountain, down, down…

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The reason Yuder opened his eyes was because he felt a chilling premonition aimed at his throat.

His head was spinning, pulled abruptly from a dream of endless falling just moments ago, but Yuder silently surveyed the darkness. There stood a black shadow by his bed, a figure with no chance of being the Priest Lusan, a sword pointed at his throat.

“Who are you?” he asked in a hushed voice, only for the sword to inch closer to his neck.

“Where is the prince?”

The question came out as a raspy whisper, deliberately altered with a substance.

Yuder said nothing in response, instead, he looked around him. Even in the darkness, if he focused, he could discern some semblance of presence.

‘Five people. No, Awakeners…judging from the altered voices, professional assassins perhaps.’

“Answer me. Where is the prince?”

“An assassin, are you?”

Yuder quietly countered. The masked assassin chuckled in disbelief.

“The one asking questions is me, not you. If you don’t answer this time, you die. Where is the prince?”

Instead of replying, Yuder exerted his power. The assassin's sword abruptly jerked upwards just as multiple sparks sporadically lit up their surroundings. The assassins, startled by the sudden light piercing their eyes, swallowed their breaths. Seizing the moment, Yuder sprang up, drew the sword beside him, and, reversing their positions, held the assassin by his throat.

The assassin reflexively launched his power, but the projectiles were redirected to pierce his bodies and his comrades'. In the blink of an eye, everything was over, and stifled screams filled the room.

"Ah, ugh!"

"Is it my turn to ask questions now?"

Yuder lightly smirked, holding his sword close to the assassin's neck. The reflected light from the blade cast an eerie, terrifying glow on his face. The assassins, unable to believe the rapidly reversed situation, gasped for breath as they squirmed around on the floor.

"How…how is this possible?"

"Why did you target me? Answer me properly how you managed to follow me here."

The assassins, quickly overwhelmed by the young man who seemed anything but formidable, considered suicide as soon as they realized they were dealing with someone extraordinary. A decision befitting professional assassins, but Yuder didn't give them the liberty to carry it out.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Ugh!"

Before they could retrieve their hidden poison, massive droplets of water materialized out of thin air, engulfing their heads and forcing

their mouths open. The water, moving smoothly like an extension of Yuder, slipped through the cracks of their masks and into their mouths, extracting the concealed poison in mere seconds.

No matter how they struggled, the water didn't recede. Only when their consciousness was nearly clouded did the water finally disappear. After numerous coughing fits mixed with water, the assassins regained their senses to find themselves bound and unarmed.

"Cough…cough…cough!"

The water dripping from their heads and faces made them realize that the events had not been an illusion.

"What…what's happening?"

Observing the assassins' stupefied expressions, Yuder impassively lifted a finger. The water rippling above it was a clear manifestation of his will.

"Well… I ask again. Answer straight without giving me any trouble. If you don't, I'll show you something worse than death."

The speaker's eyes, darker than usual due to a particularly unpleasant dream he had awoken from, stirred an instinctive fear in the one who faced him. The assassins were terrified by the fact that, despite causing such tremendous chaos, they could not invoke even a slight surprise in the being before them - an action as insignificant as a breath.

They averted their gaze reflexively, bowing their heads in apprehension.

"We… we will answer. Therefore…"

"Answer in a respectful tone."

“…We will comply.”

It didn’t take long for Yuder to gather all the information he needed from them. They were trained assassins, bred to hunt their targets by scent. The scent was imparted onto one of Prince Ejain’s personal belongings using the power of a deceased servant, and the original group of ten had been reduced to five due to an unexpected encounter with a monster.

The remaining five had followed Ejain all the way here, deliberating whether to pursue the thinning scent trail leading out of the base or the one still present within. Deciding it would be safer not to split their forces further, they resolved to find Ejain, who might still be hiding in the base.

And so, they had infiltrated the room of Yuder, upon whom Ejain’s scent was strongest, waiting for him to fall asleep.

Their caution to operate under the assumption that Prince Ejain had already become aware of their scent and might play them after confirming the servant’s corpse proved to be their downfall.

“…Did the scent cling to me because I shook hands with the prince at the end, and it transferred to my glove? We did hang around often, so it could have happened then. Either way, it doesn’t matter.”

Based on the information they provided, Yuder speculated, but the unconscious assassins before him could not confirm his hypothesis. With a familiar routine, he gagged them, bound their hands and feet more securely, and stowed them away separately under his bed and inside his wardrobe.

‘Is it fortunate that they came to me first before the others here were harmed?’

In truth, if the assassins hadn't encountered the aberrant monsters in the dangerous wilderness, they would have left some members at the base and continued pursuing Ejain toward where Kishiar and his group had headed. The only seemingly positive outcome from the monstrous abnormalities causing widespread damage everywhere was this.

After settling everything, Yuder felt a discomfort lingering in the room. He stepped outside and stared at the swaying trees in the darkness. Inside the base, an unaware tranquility prevailed, as everyone had fallen asleep.

'The last place the assassins visited to confirm the servant's corpse must have been the safehouse where we spent the night. The ones who claimed to have fought there would be the Knights of Peletta…'

If so, Nathan Zuckerman, who was trailing Kishiar's group, and the Knights of Peletta, would likely also know this. They too would have ventured into the wilderness, but there were doubts over how smoothly they could have traveled with two servants in tow.

'I'm a bit worried they might have encountered the aberrant monsters.'

Even with Nathan Zuckerman, the Swordmaster, it was likely that there had been minimal damage, but Yuder hoped that they would find their way to him if possible.

'I'd be better off if I could go and find them.'

He longed to leave this place immediately. He suppressed this deep urge, alternately clenching and unclenching his hand, but in the end, his conclusion was clear. Sighing, Yuder reached into his pocket and pulled out two candies, then put one back in. While rolling the remaining candy in his mouth, the sweetness seemed to slightly soothe his frayed nerves.

At the same time, what came to his mind was part of a dream he had just before waking.

‘The Battle of Pethuamet… that must have been it.’

Although the feeling had faded by half due to dealing with a tough issue right after waking up, one thing was certain. The largest monster he encountered during the Western subjugation mission, and the overwhelming force of Kishiar handling it.

He groped in the darkness of his memories, recalling the incident. The monster named Pethuamet looked identical to him, but was much smaller, leading a group of weaker individuals. Although there were cases of similar monsters banding together, it was the first time that a particularly large individual was seen with others.

The smaller ones could be dealt with quickly, but Pethuamet became increasingly more powerful as they attacked, causing extensive damage. What he saw in his dream was the day Kishiar stepped forward after days of siege and even a trap that collapsed a mountain failed.

He utilized the power of an Awakener, which he had not fully shown before, to kill Pethuamet. Only after killing that monster did they finally reveal that its weaknesses were its tongue and certain parts of its soft internal organs.

Even after that, many monsters appeared until the end of the campaign, but none like Pethuamet. And Kishiar, who had dealt with the creature, did not step forward again.

‘I remember… when I enveloped the falling Kishiar from the cliff with the power of wind, slowing his descent for a safe landing.’

Although he fainted momentarily due to overusing his power, Kishiar, who woke up shortly after landing, told Yuder that he had acted unnecessarily.

“Why didn’t you retreat as I told you? You could have died doing something pointless.”

The words he spat out immediately upon waking were remembered vividly in Yuder’s mind after a very long time. Seeing that these buried memories surfaced so well, the stimulus received through the dream must have been significant.

To quell his unintentionally souring mood, Yuder rubbed his forehead with his hand, deciding to recall memories from a different direction. For instance…

‘Pethuamet’s tongue.’

The image of the cut tongue he had briefly glimpsed in his dream, and the blue light blinking on it, along with some patterns, came back to his mind. While dreaming, he felt it was familiar, but couldn’t identify it. However, upon remembering it, he quickly figured out the answer.

Yuder turned his gaze toward the magic circles shining with a faint white light, or perhaps a blue light, not too far away. The patterns blinking on the severed tongue of Pethuamet he had seen in his dream were alarmingly similar to these circles, meticulously restored by the mages of the Western Mage Union.

‘I seem to recall thinking they looked like magic circles in my dream, but I can’t be sure whether that was a complete memory from a previous life, or if my dream just mixed things up.’

While he didn’t fully understand the magic circles, he knew that the person drawing them and the pattern and ancient language used varied completely depending on the magic to be cast. Yuder roughly drew the symbols that he had seen blinking on the severed tongue in his dream, tracing them with his toe in the dirt.

‘When the day breaks, I must deal with the captured assassins and ask the other mages about this pattern.’

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The morning had arrived, and within the Western Mage Union, a minor uproar had broken out.

The union leader, Micalin, was taken aback by the shocking news reported by Yuder. The report claimed that during the night, five night visitors had infiltrated their stronghold. Afterward, upon seeing their beaten and bloodied figures bound up like fish, Micalin was rendered speechless.

“…Could they be dead already?”

“They are not dead, merely unconscious.”

“But there wasn’t that much blood before.”

“They won’t die from this amount of blood loss. So don’t worry.”

Micalin cast a new look at Yuder, the man who had single-handedly caught all the night intruders. When they first met, he had found the young man’s character surprisingly mature for his age. Although he had kept quiet and appeared kind-hearted, primarily focusing on helping the mages under his command, his nonchalant attitude while looking at the defeated intruders struck Micalin as odd.

But what on earth was that dry, unbothered face in front of these tortured individuals? Even Micalin, who had become accustomed to surprises after experiencing all sorts of things, felt a chill down his spine upon witnessing Yuder’s emotionless demeanor.

“So… you want me to find a place to detain them?”

“Yes. I’m sorry to ask this of you as these people have nothing to do with the Western Mage Union. However, we can’t kill them right

away. As soon as the rest of my group returns, we'll decide what to do. In the meantime, you don't have to worry about watching over them, I will handle that."

Yuder explained that these intruders were hired to disrupt a mission his group was performing. His demeanor while asking to borrow a holding place until his team could deal with the issue was so practiced, it seemed he had done this more than once or twice.

"The building next door could be used. Although it's partly damaged, the basement remains… It was originally used to store reagents, so it's sturdy, and the locking mechanism still works."

"That seems appropriate. Understood."

"Can I count on you to make sure they're not noticeable? We're just starting to recover some order, and it'd be troublesome if this event stirs things up again…"

"Yes. That's the plan."

Just as Micalin thought Yuder would immediately proceed, he paused in front of the unconscious group of five. It seemed as though he was lost in thought. Watching his brooding expression, Micalin asked inquisitively.

"Do you have anything else to say?"

"May I… ask you about something related to a magic circle?"

"A magic circle?"

The idea of this young Awakener, whose life and learning experiences were completely unknown to Micalin, asking about a magic circle intrigued him. Micalin felt a sense of pure curiosity and invited him to continue, "Go ahead."

“I feel like I have seen parts of a magic circle like this before, and I was wondering if you could recognize anything.”

Micalin looked at the piece of paper Yuder presented to him. The drawn shapes, albeit clumsy, contained familiar runes and magic activation words. They were sufficient for identification.

“This is an amplification circle developed by our Western Mage Union.”

“Western Mage Union’s amplification circle…”

As Yuder mumbled Micalin’s words, his gaze sharpened.

“Are you sure?”

“These characters here signify the beginning of a certain flow of magical power that our Union members possess. And this part is the central activation word for the amplification magic. It’s a phrase that needs to be written multiple times. Even if I only played a small part in the development of the circle, I would still recognize it, wouldn’t I?”

“…”

“But why do you ask this all of a sudden? Didn’t you see it too when you went to the ruins with Lorna yesterday?”

Yuder replied slowly as he looked down at the characters Micalin pointed out.

“I dreamt about it last night and asked, but like you said, it seems like what I saw then is still imprinted in my mind.”

“A dream? Heh.”

The youth’s face, which had been spine-chilling until a moment ago, began to feel somewhat human again. Micalin burst into laughter, stroking his rough ash-colored beard.

“You’ve drawn it quite well for something you saw in a dream. These magic circles are incredibly hard to memorize and draw, taking quite some time to learn. If you can remember this much after only one viewing, then your visit to the ruins must have left quite an impression on you.”

“…Yes, it was impressive.”

Yuder folded the paper and put it back into his pocket.

“But… may I ask one more thing? Could such a magic circle possibly be left on a monster’s body?”

It was a somewhat odd question. However, among the mages obsessed with research, there were indeed those who did such things, so Micalin didn’t find it strange.

“A magic circle on a monster’s body? Hmm. It’s possible for research purposes. But it’s too much trouble. Instead of drawing the circle directly on the monsters’ bodies to cast magic, I’d rather have them step onto an already prepared magic circle, or initially find a monster that can absorb magic. It’s much faster that way.”

“I’ve heard of monsters that can absorb magic, but do they also absorb magic circles?”

“If they can absorb magic that has already been formed from magic power, wouldn’t they be able to absorb a magic circle with the same structure? Of course, I haven’t tried it, but according to the records left by the Pearl Tower mages who created the Misty Wind Horse 450 years ago…”

Micalin enthusiastically quoted from past records to explain, but Yuder couldn’t understand any more of his words. After his fiery explanation, he thanked Micalin, wrapped the unconscious assassins in the power of the wind, and slipped outside.

It was still early dawn, but thankfully Micalin was up early. Thanks to him, Yuder was able to quickly take care of the assassins and resolve his curiosity. He had just wanted to know if the magic circle from his dream really existed, but the answer he got was shockingly unexpected.

‘It’s not just any magic circle, but a part of the amplification circle created by the Western Mage Union…’

Was it really a coincidence that he saw that circle in his dream? It didn’t feel right to dismiss it as a simple memory manifesting in his dream. In fact, there were quite a few pieces of information recalled in his dream.

Information that Pethuamet was first spotted near the Great Sarain Forest, and even the vague memory of Kishiar’s ability.

The moment he thought of Kishiar in his dream, who had looked at him with twisted eyes, his stomach churned again. Despite trying to push the memory away, the dreams he had so far and the dream from last night kept intertwining in his mind, spinning thoughts like a mill.

Suppose the dream Kishiar, who chuckled while mumbling about breaking a pot while collecting the Red Stone, was indeed real. Honestly, it was just not in his memory, but if he assumed that it was real, the fact that the strange attitude of the previous life’s Kishiar, which he couldn’t understand, was mostly acceptable, he would’ve realized that several times already through his dreams.

In any case, if all of that were indeed true, Kishiar’s condition from the viewpoint of the Western subjugation battle in his dream last night had certainly not been normal. He did not bring his divine sword, knowing full well that his life was in danger on the battlefield, nor did he use swordsmanship, magic, or divine power. If this were the Kishiar of this lifetime, he might have been concealing his power,

but he certainly would not have refrained from using it even in dire situations.

But if his condition was abnormal, why on earth had he gone to such lengths to kill Pethuamet?

Of course, thanks to his intervention, all the Cavalry members, including Yuder, survived unscathed. But there was no benefit left for Kishiar. He was no longer involved in the subjugation himself, and he began to be surrounded by even more malicious rumors than before.

The past Yuder had not been particularly curious about why Kishiar had done that. He would have guessed that Kishiar had done it for some necessary reason, and he would have asked about it and probably been ignored, so he forgot about it.

No matter how much he thought about it, the only conclusion was that the power Kishiar showed at that time was akin to self-harm, and he couldn’t guess the reason.

“Self-harm.”

Yuder repeated the word he thought of, furrowing his brow.

If it were his past self, he would have thought that there was no word less suited to Kishiar than that, but now he could not be so sure. The pale face that had appeared before him, tearing his own arm off just before he came to the west, was still vivid in his memory.

Kishiar was a man who could potentially make the choice to harm himself for somewhat irrational reasons.

“For somewhat irrational reasons…”

The face from his dream that exuded cold anger the moment he asked him to back off flickered in his mind. It certainly did not seem rational…

His head started to hurt, so Yuder stopped walking for a moment and took a long breath.

“No. Now is not the time to speculate.”

He had a duty to investigate other information he had heard from Micalin. Yuder checked a few pieces of information he knew about the magic-power-absorbing monster.

“I don’t remember encountering any of the monsters I remember during the Western subjugation mission. What was Pethuamet’s group like in my past life?”

The ones who resembled Pethuamet were a nuisance to deal with in groups, but they were not particularly difficult to deal with. Since there were not many mages in the West capable of dealing with them, they were mostly dealt with early on by the Cavalry members and Knights.

“At that time, hardly any mages came forward, so I don’t remember whether the monsters had the property of absorbing magic power or not. It’s difficult to remember this, given that I’ve dealt with more than a few monsters.”

But as he rubbed his forehead, trying to recall, one thing came back to him. He remembered receiving a report that crop damage had been quite severe due to Pethuamet’s group, who swarmed like locusts, destroying or consuming everything in their path.

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Chapter 275

‘An instinct to devour whatever comes its way. The first discovered place. And the amplification magic circle of the Western Mage Union…’

A few words were continuously spinning in his head, as if they were biting each other’s tails.

While Yuder had locked up the assassins in the basement of the next building, he had been alternating between thinking about what had changed during his Western subjugation mission in his previous life and this life, and the new information he had discovered today.

As a result, a hypothesis floated in his mind.

‘In my previous life, Pethuamet appeared later than now. It was in the midst of receiving significant damage within the western borders of the Empire. So, the mages of the Western Mage Union who were staying at this base at the time must have already been dead.’

Chronologically, Pethuamet appeared after some time had passed since the death of the Western Mage Union mages and the base had collapsed. If the mages had died unable to properly respond due to the onslaught of monsters behaving abnormally, what had happened to their research subject, the Magic Spring?

Even now, when it had only been under attack for about a day, it was so destroyed. It was an unvisited place where recovery efforts had been abandoned; there was nothing more to see.

This was the Great Sarain Forest, where huge trees mysteriously grew so much that, left alone even for just a day, there was not a single spot for a human to step foot, let alone after a week. The mages of the Western Mage Union had forcibly suppressed its

power using magic to build structures and open paths, but magic wasn't eternal.

All spaces that lost their caster and controller would undoubtedly return to dense forest. There might have been Union mages left in other cities, but how many would have the courage to come here as the entirety of the West crumbled due to monsters? Even if they somehow managed to come, the chances of them surviving for long were slim.

The Pearl Tower, their only hope for assistance, had also given up expectations regarding the research of the Magic Spring. No one would have wanted to help with what happened here, and the poorly amplified Magic Spring must have been left neglected.

But while humans couldn't survive here, it didn't mean monsters couldn't. What if monsters capable of absorbing magic power happened to appear near this base and the Magic Spring Ruins, absorbing remnants of the broken magic circle, or perhaps the concentrated magic power flowing from the spring?

And if that had proven effective…

What would have happened?

"…"

The magic circle remaining on Pethuamet's tongue had been an amplification circle. The strange power of the monster, which kept growing and swelling despite all attacks, fit perfectly if one assumed it wasn't inherent, but originated from the absorbed amplification circle.

'…This is an excessive conjecture.'

For now, it was just a hypothesis. In this life, he couldn't be certain about something that hadn't even occurred yet. However, it

wasn’t entirely implausible either.

Yuder recalled the magic stones and all sorts of medium materials that had been embedded countless times in the trees, land, and rocks surrounding the Magic Spring to draw and maintain the magic circle. Suddenly, a cold breeze blew down his spine.

‘What a pity. If only I had looked more closely at Pethuamet’s severed tongue in my previous life.’

At that time, Yuder, without even realizing that it resembled a magic circle, had quickly forgotten everything while rushing toward Kishiar. When he retrieved Pethuamet’s corpse after everything was over, he couldn’t find the once-shining blue light anymore.

Yuder looked around at the various destroyed buildings that were once strongholds of the Western Mage Union. When he first learned about the mages of the Western Mage Union, he had merely assumed they were unfortunate souls who had died prematurely in a previous life. However, everything seemed different when he speculated that perhaps more things had started here than he initially thought.

The Cavalry members from his past life, Yuder, as well as Kishiar, were all so busy dealing with the situation at hand that they had no idea what they had missed. When the scenes he’d seen in his dreams suddenly overlapped with his current vision, a bitter taste filled his mouth.

‘I still don’t know why I keep having these dreams… but no matter how much I think about it, they can’t just be simple dreams.’

After being pierced by the power radiated from the Red Stone, Yuder’s body and power began to undergo unprecedented changes. It was around that time when the dreams began. Perhaps, those dreams signified another change taking place within him, not in his physical body.

Humans have a mind in addition to a physical body. Priests often referred to this as the soul. Although no one has ever seen or proven the existence of the soul, there was no more appropriate term to explain how Yuder Aile, who came back to eleven years before after dying, managed to retain all his previous memories.

If the changes initiated by the power of the Red Stone were occurring in both the physical body and the soul, where would they lead? Yuder wasn't fond of the fact that, unlike the body, it was impossible to know what and how the soul changed and what its original state had been.

It would be a lie if he said he wasn't anxious, but it had already started. No matter how many times he revisited the past, Yuder wouldn't change his choice to surround others with a protective power just before the Red Stone's power was unleashed. What had happened had happened, and there was still no change in the resolution he made when he realized he had been given another chance after death.

He would prevent the recurrence of disaster. Even the smallest thing not repeating the past was crucial. Considering this, he could say that his current situation was going extremely well. Yuder looked at his hand in the black glove and clenched it into a fist.

'I need to learn more about that amplification and the surrounding situation until the others come back.'

—-

"It looks like we're about to reach the promised place."

Kishiar, who had been looking at the distant sky, turned his gaze towards Gakane, who was reporting. They had stayed up all night and had finally reached the trade route in the Great Sarain Forest where they were supposed to meet Ejain's men. Although they hadn't seen anyone else on the way due to the recent mass monster

outbreak, the morale of the group was boosted merely by reaching their destination.

As they approached the meeting place, the silent Prince Ejain began to give detailed directions.

“It seems we’re going the right way if we follow the color of the flag hanging on that branch. There should be a small mountain hut nearby where merchants and mercenaries rest. Those who came to pick me up should be there.”

“There’s a wooden house over there!”

The Eldore siblings who spotted the mountain hut pointed it out shortly after. Kishiar raised his hand to momentarily halt the group and looked around. He didn’t sense anything unusual, but his intuition found the excessive tranquility somewhat strange.

The situation differed from the numerous encounters with monsters they had faced during their journey. The cool gaze hidden within the depths of his cap swept the surroundings before pausing on Ejain, whose expression had notably hardened.

“This place reeks particularly strongly.”

“…”

“How many people did you say we would meet here?”

“I was told around 20.”

“Considering that, the surrounding area is suspiciously quiet. We should check it out. Gakane, scout ahead.”

“Yes.”

“And Emun. Remember, your mission is only just beginning.”

“Yes, yes. Excuse me for a moment, your Highness.”

As the shadowy figure rose and silently ran towards the lodge, Emun Philang prepared his abilities to potentially conceal the Prince within the darkness at any moment, staying closely by Ejain’s side.

Just as Gakane’s shadow clone reached the lodge and opened the door, a barrage of sharp arrows erupted from within, as if they had been waiting for this exact moment. Had he merely approached and opened the door, he would have been seriously injured.

Kishiar laughed softly as he watched the arrows pass harmlessly through the shadow clone and embed themselves in random spots. A moment later, those who emerged from the open door wore baffled expressions.

“There’s no one there. Who opened the door?”

But their bewilderment was short-lived; it didn’t take long for their eyes to change as they spotted the Prince and the Cavalry members standing at a distance.

“…No, your Highness!”

“Modi, Clein. It’s good to see you both here after so long. I didn’t expect you two to be among those who made it this far. Jean and Vellentin are here too.”

“Do you think we value our lives over serving you, your Highness? But why did you come here alone instead of sending the other attendants first as promised? We thought you were a monster or an intruder and attacked… We are truly sorry.”

Between those who were uncertainly apologizing, suspicious gazes flickered toward the Cavalry members.

“But your Highness… who exactly are those with you?”

Ejain’s subordinates wore common mercenary clothing, but their eyes were extremely sharp. At first glance, they all seemed to be of exceptional skill. But Kishiar’s gaze easily caught the impure glint hiding within the welcoming expressions of those who had been waiting for the Prince.

‘There isn’t just one suspicious aspect.’

All the Cavalry members and Prince Ejain seemed to have noticed the strange element that Kishiar had picked up on, and were hiding their tense expressions.

“The other attendants will follow soon. These people have done me the favor of protecting me on the journey here, so do not treat them lightly.”

“Understood. Everyone, please come in. You must have been exhausted from traveling through these treacherous lands.”

“Before that, I have a question.”

“Yes?”

Ejain turned to his subordinates with a bitter expression.

“Where are the others who were originally supposed to come, and why are only you here?”

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In front of Ejain now stood less than ten of his subordinates. This was a far cry from the twenty or so he had been promised. The atmosphere among the subordinates grew tense in an instant, seemingly picking up on the guardedness in Ejain's gaze.

After a long silence, one of the subordinates awkwardly broke the tense air.

"What do you mean, your Highness?"

"I wonder where Lord Kivan, who should be responsible for you all, has gone, and why I cannot see Rhys and Chaise. They are capable rangers and should be involved in this."

"Didn't you know? On our way here, we had to constantly fend off trackers and monsters…"

"…"

"Since we had to come to you as quickly as possible, we couldn't afford to bring along colleagues who were falling behind. That's why Lord Kivan, Rhys, and Chaise entrusted your safety to us. We understand your unease, but it's excessive to doubt us without reason…"

"…"

"We think it's too harsh to…"

His stuttering trailed off as he noticed Ejain's increasingly icy expression. It seemed he realized that no matter what he said, Ejain would not be convinced. Kishiar stealthily gripped the handle of his

concealed divine sword Orr from under his cloak, watching the man's hand slowly inching towards the sword at his waist.

"Damn it. He's damn quick at noticing. Get him!"

Finally, the man unsheathed his sword and began to charge. His colleagues too brandished their weapons and launched their attack. It was as expected.

"Prince! This way!"

After confirming that Emun had grabbed Ejain's arm and used his ability to disappear into the darkness, Kishiar swiftly drew his sword. While they were outnumbered, these foes were no stronger than the monsters they had faced.

"Keep them alive for questioning. Subdue them."

"Yes!"

With that response, Gakane's shadow clone and the Eldore siblings' body transformation abilities activated simultaneously. To avoid getting swept up in the sudden battle, Kanna stepped back, drawing her dagger and keenly observing their surroundings.

"A- Awakeners?"

"They're all just tricks! Don't falter!"

Finally realizing who they were up against, the opponents gritted their teeth and began to fight back. However, the outcome was quickly clear. Kishiar didn't even need to exert himself. As the ones with deep injuries to their limbs started being subdued one after another, rage and terror spread across the faces of the remaining few.

"…We can't… Scatter!"

When only three opponents were left fighting, the man with the loudest voice who had been encouraging the others cursed and retreated quickly. The others, after sharing a glance, scattered in different directions and began to flee. Gakane's shadow clone chased one of them, but was distracted by a bomb the man pulled out and threw, missing him by a hair's breadth.

A muffled bang sounded as the shadow clone took the full brunt of the explosion. A hole appeared in its chest, out of which thin black smoke billowed, and with a hiss, it disappeared. Wiping the sweat trickling from his forehead, Gakane watched the shadow clone vanish.

"Ah, damn… I'm sorry. I let him get away."

"It's okay. You did well. For now, let's gather those we've subdued."

Kishiar casually praised the Cavalry members before approaching the injured who were tended to by the Eldore siblings. Just then, Prince Ejain, after Emun had recollected his shadow power, approached with a pallid face.

"Have you dealt with everyone?"

"Regrettably, three have escaped."

"I see."

Ejain exhaled deeply.

"I owe you once again. Thank you."

"I only did what I ought to have done."

With a smile, Kishiar took a step back. The Eldore siblings also returned their colossal bodies to their original sizes and retreated

with the Commander, leaving the defeated individuals to face Ejain's icy gaze alone. It was amusing to see these people, who had been so confident until moments ago, now wince in pain and avoid Ejain's gaze.

"Your Highness… Please, forgive us. We only followed orders…"

"I'm curious as to whose orders you were supposed to follow, because it should have been mine."

"We…"

Ejain smirked at the sight of their resentful expressions, struggling to continue their sentences. It was less the attitude of a wounded person and more a self-directed mockery. Perhaps sensing his seemingly softened demeanor, the defeated individuals began to squirm and beg for mercy.

"The… the ones who ran away planned this. They tricked us."

"Yes, it seems I have been used. Please, forgive me! I made a mistake despite knowing how merciful you are, Your Highness."

Yet, Ejain's gaze did not change. After glancing over the faces of those begging for forgiveness, he opened his mouth slowly.

"I accepted everyone who wanted to join me, believing that to stand against my brothers, I first had to match their strength. I thought that if I showed trust indiscriminately, I would eventually receive a response. I believed that this was a test that a magnanimous King like myself should endure."

"Your… Your Highness…"

"But now, I've come to accept. It wasn't real faith. It's shameful to think that due to my naive stubbornness, I failed to protect those who truly needed my protection."

Ejain drew his own sword.

“Tell me what you did to those who have disappeared. That’s the only answer you owe me now.”

As fragments of a faint blue aura began to flicker on the sword blade, terror washed over the faces of those looking on.

“Commander, if it’s not too much to ask, could you trace the footsteps of those who fled? I want to take responsibility and deal with these men myself.”

Kishiar alternately observed the gasping traitors and Prince Ejain, who had turned his back with a sword in hand. From the Prince’s back, he could sense an emotion much firmer than before—an emotion of someone who had fully experienced the bitter taste of life that no one could have anticipated on his journey out of the Empire. What had previously seemed like sheer chaos had apparently found some kind of resolution.

Kishiar slowly nodded toward the prince’s steadfast figure.

“Very well.”

Following Kishiar’s gesture, the Cavalry members, who had been surreptitiously worrying about Ejain, also turned their backs and moved on. From behind them, suppressed groans and the smell of blood began to slowly permeate the surroundings of the mountain hut.

“Would the Prince be alright? He seems like a good man…”

Emun’s question, filled with concern, faintly echoed. After a moment of silence, Kishiar flashed a smile.

‘A good man.’

It was rare for a noble or royal to receive such an appraisal from others, despite not having engaged in much conversation for several days. Undoubtedly, it was for this reason that Emperor Keilusa decided to lend a hand to Ejain, after recognizing his modest potential.

Despite possessing admirable qualities, Prince Ejain had not been able to truly harness his destiny, lacking confidence in himself. Abandoning those who should be abandoned, and trusting those who should be trusted, was indeed a difficult task. Without conviction, blindly discarding everything or thoughtlessly believing might lead one forward, but how could the end of such a path be promising?

Kishiar surmised that, above all, Ejain needed that conviction to survive. And just a moment ago, Ejain had finally taken a step towards gaining it himself.

‘The statement about the inability to progress by constantly abandoning means one cannot live merely by embracing everything.’

Fortunately, it seemed that Ejain had given some deep thought to the words they had briefly exchanged at the riverbank before dawn.

‘Only if Prince Ejain survives can I receive the object promised to me, and only then can the future proceed steadily.’

The rumors about the other princes of Nelarn were not very favorable. There would be no better ally for the Empire and Kishiar than Ejain, who was receiving popular support from the common people and had the audacity to decide to join hands with the Empire. Kishiar earnestly hoped that this young prince would become stronger based on today’s foundation.

‘Then he wouldn’t needlessly envy what others possess.’

The moment the dark pupils, which had been looking at him with utmost anxiety upon realizing he couldn’t follow him here, surged into his mind, Kishiar unwittingly forgot all his political calculations up to that point. It was when he momentarily smiled gently that a desperate shout suddenly came from behind him.

“Die!”

A sharp murderous intent accompanied the clashing sound of metal on metal. The last of the betrayers was making his final attack, drawing a dagger he had hidden on his person.

The attack of an animal driven into a corner was beyond ruthless. Under normal circumstances, Ejain could have easily blocked it, but unfortunately, his physical and mental strength had been significantly drained from taking the lives of several people just moments before.

Light flashed, and a scream echoed.

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“Sir Aile? Is something wrong?”

“No, I thought I heard something for a moment, so I just checked. It seems I was mistaken.”

“A sound? What kind of sound do you mean?”

Yuder paused briefly, detached his gaze from the depths of the forest he had glanced back at, and turned to look at Lorna. They were again on the move today, exploring the ancient site of the Magic Spring. The two other mages who usually accompanied them had decided not to join, preferring to prioritize the final stages of reinforcing their outpost’s protective magic circles. Despite their absence, Lorna insisted on inspecting the magic circle control point around the Magic Spring and the surrounding warehouses, even if she had to do it alone. Such was her passion, and from Yuder’s perspective, who had decided to revisit the amplification circle, it was a welcome development.

However, passion and fear were separate emotions. Every time Yuder paused and surveyed the surroundings, Lorna failed to completely hide her anxious expression. To reassure her, Yuder responded calmly.

“I thought I heard something like a human voice. It definitely wasn’t a monster.”

“I see.”

Relieved, Lorna loosened her grip on the magic tool she had been holding tightly.

“The dense forest of the Great Sarain Forest doesn’t absorb sounds but reflects them. It’s been two days since the last monster incident, so it’s possible that brave traders or mercenaries are passing nearby. Or… perhaps you heard the sound made by the deserters.”

“There are deserters here too?”

Yesterday it was rumors of human trafficking, today it was deserters. There seemed to be quite a bit of peculiar information that only those who had spent a long time in the Great Sarain Forest would know.

“They show up from time to time. Most of them are escapees from the Western countries who sneak into the Great Sarain Forest. As you may know, the political situation over there has been unstable for quite some time and the hand of pursuit doesn’t reach properly here.”

Lorna replied casually, then slightly furrowed her brows a moment later.

“But the power of the Great Sarain Forest is hard for ordinary people to endure. I’ve heard that they usually don’t survive for long.”

Yuder recalled information from his past life, where the political situation among the Western countries had been quite unstable until King Ejain established his rule. Even after Ejain’s coronation, countries like Durban had been noisy due to internal strife, so it was understandable that people who had prepared for death would choose to escape to the Great Sarain Forest to survive.

“I see. Before coming here, I thought there would hardly be any people in the Great Sarain Forest… But it seems there are more than I thought.”

“There aren’t many people who stay here continuously like us, but until the anomalies began, we would often see mercenaries and traders passing by from a distance.”

After saying this, Lorna began telling him about a deserter she had vaguely seen from a distance several months ago while passing this path. It was an account of a sighting, a woman holding a young boy’s hand, heading deep into the jungle.

“Perhaps there’s someone in the Great Sarain Forest who has actually built a village, and we just don’t know about it yet. There are such rumors, after all. Of course, I don’t mean that I believe them. Even we have only been able to create this outpost over a span of several years. How could ordinary people who can’t use magic do such a thing?”

By that point, the warehouse had appeared, so Lorna stopped talking. Following her, Yuder started meticulously examining the magic circles surrounding the warehouse as they walked.

“It seems a monster roamed the vicinity last night. I can see tracks drawn along the protection circle on the ground. First, we should go to the central control circle and rectify the position of the magic stones.”

The site of the central control circle was, not unlike yesterday, left half destroyed and neglected. Lorna began to reposition the magic stones scattered haphazardly around the rocks, trees, and ground surrounding the magic circle, but realizing the task would not be swiftly finished on her own, she asked for Yuder’s help.

“Could you lend a hand? It’s simple, we should be done quickly.”

“Understood. What should I do?”

“First and foremost, we need to restore this control cicrcle, which is linked to the amplification circle within the Magic Spring. Just

move the materials as I direct you…”

As directed by Lorna, Yuder used the power of wind and earth to move the magic stones and set them back in place. As the work progressed much faster than when Lorna had done it alone by hand, she appeared thankful yet fleetingly tinged with bitterness.

“You’re doing wonderfully. Can you see the magic circle rising back into its proper form?”

“Yes, I can see it.”

Yuder gazed up at the vast, increasingly vivid blue magic circle before him. It looked as if three magic circles had been combined in a crisscross pattern, and Lorna had told him the one on top was the amplification circle.

The pattern on the slowly revolving amplification circle, like the wheel of a carriage, undeniably resembled what Yuder had seen in his dream the previous night.

‘So Micalin was right after all.’

Throughout the process of moving the magic stones, Yuder’s gaze never left the amplification circle. After he had stared long enough to memorize the pattern, he spoke to Lorna, who was still busy with the task at hand.

“I’ve heard that this amplification magic circle was developed by the Western Mage Union, but how is it different from others?”

“It’s all about efficiency. It has a protective effect that prevents the amplified power from dispersing indiscriminately. Considering the risk of the magic power inside the Magic Spring continuously amplifying until it explodes or leaks out, we developed it ourselves with that in mind.”

Lorna’s gaze turned to the amplification circle.

“We’ve worked really hard on it. But once we finished the development and installation, changes started to occur in the Magic Spring immediately. It made all our efforts worthwhile. Of course, its condition isn’t great now due to the damage… but we must fix it soon.”

She seemed quite proud of the amplification circle. However, after listening to her detailed explanation, Yuder felt even more uncomfortable than before. He couldn’t put it into words, but he had a feeling that something very awkward was coming.

‘In order to accelerate the stalled research and for efficiency, they added a protective power to the amplification circle… If it’s true that cracks began to appear around the same time the circle was installed, would restoring this circle really be a good thing?’

The Magic Spring was originally a place where thick magic power gathered.

If Lorna was right and the Magic Spring had existed since a thousand years ago, then it may have been part of the history of this Great Sarain Forest from the very beginning.

Over nearly a thousand years, the forest that was once not so large expanded its territory gradually, consuming the borders of four countries and becoming an immense green land untouched by anyone. The historical records of the countries clearly confirmed that the forest had been expanding over time.

The Great Sarain Forest, known for its inexhaustible vitality that could not be quelled, no matter how much one attempted, and the last place where the deep and pure magic power had gathered, a power that was believed to have disappeared long ago. Had the Western Mage Union ever once pondered the possible connection between the two?

He wanted to ask, but he could not. Yuder quietly scrutinized Lorna as she began to restore the magic circle, lost in his own thoughts.

‘If there is a correlation, forcing an increase in the magic power concentrated in the spring and containing it might have influenced the Great Sarain Forest and caused the crack to begin appearing here.’

But even if that were true, it was doubtful whether the mages of the Western Mage Alliance would be willing to dismantle the amplification circle they had worked so hard to develop and abandon their research.

“Sir Aile, could you please move that blue magic stone over here?”

Yuder halted his thoughts as he reflexively applied his strength in response to Lorna’s request. Seeing the passionate gleam in the mage’s eyes, who would not hesitate to give her life to restore the circle, it seemed that she had no interest in what Yuder might be thinking.

“When do you suppose we will be done with this?”

“We’re almost there. It’s difficult to restore everything, but once we adjust the position of those magic stones over there, we’ll head into the Magic Spring to examine it. You must be bored, having come to see the spring and only doing this. Oh, are you very tired?”

“No, I’m not tired. It’s just that the circle has been damaged for a few days now, and I’m wondering if the spring will be okay.”

“It’ll be fine. The amplified magic power might have spread a bit, but in its pure state, it won’t harm humans.”

Yuder, looking at Lorna’s smiling face, cautiously drew a breath.

‘Maybe I should prod a little.’

“If it does not harm humans… what about other things?”

“Other things?”

The smile on Lorna’s face faded slightly.

“Are you suggesting… Ah, you mean that strange crack? But that…”

“No, I mean, for instance, what would happen if a monster that absorbs magic power accidentally appears nearby? I recalled hearing from Micalin that such monsters exist.”

At Yuder’s words, Lorna’s eyes narrowed.

“There are such monsters, but they’re extremely rare. Imagining one of those rare creatures coming all the way here to absorb the spreading magic power or the magic circle is quite pessimistic.”

Pessimistic, was it really?

Just as Yuder was about to respond, Lorna suddenly turned her head.

“Did you hear that?”

“Pardon?”

“It sounded like there was a noise.”

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There was no need to question what she meant. Almost instantly after she had finished speaking, a faint sound could be heard echoing from somewhere. It was as if someone was slowly stepping on fallen leaves or perhaps chewing on something brittle, a faint and eerie sound. Despite looking around, there were no signs of other people or creatures. Yuder felt his senses come to life, tingling throughout his body.

Following the chilly sensation that warned of danger, he slowly lifted his head. His eyes met with a monster perched high up in a tree, rustling leaves and drooling incessantly.

“A monster!”

“Fall back.”

Yuder, ignoring Lorna’s screams, stepped forward. The monster met his gaze with indifference, its tail hanging down, swaying while it continued to tear and munch on the leaves. Although its size was comparable to a small puppy, its tongue was long and thick, and its teeth sharp. He almost laughed upon seeing the dark, smooth fur, tinged with purple spots, and thorns embedded in its tail, which was much longer and thicker than its body.

‘Is this why I had that dream yesterday?’

Though much smaller than when he had seen it in his previous life, he recognized it immediately. The monster was like a miniaturized version of Pethuamet.

“Do you know anything about that monster?”

“I don’t. It’s the first time I’ve seen this monster.”

The chances of a monster with the property of absorbing magic appearing were incredibly slim, and though it was too pessimistic to imagine, what would Lorna say if the possibility was now realized? Yuder was curious, but he decided not to confirm recklessly when the answer was not certain.

Originally, people had given a separate long name to differentiate between the giant Pethuamet and the small ones. But if, as Yuder suspected, Pethuamet accidentally swallowed the amplification circle and became giant, there would be no need for such distinction if it was, in fact, the same as the smaller ones.

Yuder decided to simply refer to the monster as Pethuamet while inspecting the creature's surroundings.

'There used to be a horde, but now there's only one?'

Monsters that appeared in groups usually did so altogether. The probability was high that there should be a horde of similar monsters nearby if that one was here. But no matter how much he searched the upper parts of the surrounding trees, he could not spot any other monsters.

Yuder raised his hand towards the Pethuamet, which was still tearing at the leaves. Flames streamed out, burning the end of the branch the monster was perched on. Moments later, the shaking branch fell. Pethuamet, having fallen to the ground, squirmed helplessly on its back before eventually righting itself with its tail. It sluggishly shot a jet of black fluid towards Yuder in retaliation, but the weak attack failed to reach him, scorching only the innocent earth and grass before extinguishing. It was a mere matchstick flame compared to the terrifying power he had seen in his previous life.

Could this small, pitiful creature really be the same monster he had seen in his past life? It seemed so frail that one punch might kill it, an anticlimax that left him feeling empty.

Yuder watched the monster's movements as it scurried about, seeking refuge, its short limbs flailing. As it moved, the thorns at the end of its tail, which dragged along the ground, left marks on the soil.

"Ah… that trace, it seems to match the one that has been lingering here and around the ruins since yesterday. I think it was left by that creature, not another monster."

Lorna, who had been retreating, seemed relieved when she saw the monster, which appeared much weaker than she had expected, and approached it. Yuder turned his head towards the magic circle where he had been moving the magic stones just moments before. The faint traces left there and the ones left by the Pethuamet, which was now spinning around in place, looked strikingly similar to what she had said.

"…I see."

He had thought that the creature which left those traces would be large, given that most of the monsters that had appeared due to the anomaly were of considerable size. With this new piece of information, his previous assumptions began to churn in his head again.

'If my thoughts are correct, it can't be mere coincidence that these traces were left only in this area, full of magic power.'

"Sir Aile. This creature keeps heading toward the magic circle. Perhaps we should kill it and then investigate further," Lorna called to him.

While Yuder was lost in thought, the Pethuamet that had been spinning in place suddenly picked up a direction and slowly began moving toward the magic circle. It greedily licked up any noticeable grass and fallen leaves along the way, but being so small, it did not seem to make a difference.

Yuder was about to draw his sword from his hip to kill the Pethuamet when he paused, looking down at it.

“Why do you hesitate?”

“I’m curious why it keeps wandering near the magic circle and the Magic Spring. Do you mind if we observe it for a bit?”

“What?”

Whether Lorna was surprised or not, Yuder had shifted his gaze to follow the Pethuamet’s movements. The creature had reached the edge of the recovering control circle and was sniffing around, its snout lifted towards the sky. It stuck out its long tongue through its large mouth relative to its body, but the invisible wall created by the protection circle did not allow the monster’s approach and bounced it back.

Even after being repelled several times, the Pethuamet did not stop sticking out its tongue and disappointedly nibbled on the grass nearby. It then slithered around the blocked-off area, continuously sniffing around until it found something and quickly stuck out its tongue. This time, it had picked up a fragment of a dark blue stone. The moment the tiny shard, smaller than a fingernail, reflected the light and gleamed, Lorna’s eyes widened and her lips parted.

“That looks like the fragment of a magic stone I was cleaning up earlier…!”

Before her muttering could end, the Pethuamet had already shoved it into its mouth.

“No!”

Unable to wait any longer, Lorna activated her magic tool. A sharp wind spell erupted from the short club-like tool she held in her hand, striking the monster’s head.

With a piercing scream, the Pethuamet spewed black bodily fluid. Its entire body turned a deep purple, then black, over and over again. Its entire body began to swell like a boil, prompting Lorna to cry out.

“Are you just going to watch? We need to deal with it now!”

Yuder drew his sword, holding it by the handle and forcefully stabbed downward, piercing the Pethuamet. The creature, pinned to the ground, convulsed a few times before weakly sticking out its long tongue. Only after he pulled out his sword and cut off that tongue did its squirming movements finally come to a complete stop. Just as in his previous life, that long tongue was indeed its weak point.

While Lorna hurriedly ran towards the magic circle, Yuder knelt on one knee, examining the dead Pethuamet’s corpse.

“It’s gone.”

“What is?”

“The shard of magic stone it had put in its mouth.”

“It must have dropped somewhere since we killed it before it could swallow.”

Lorna was busy examining the magic circle, seemingly indifferent to this matter. But to Yuder, it was not the same. The shard of magic stone was nowhere to be found, neither inside the gaping mouth of the dead Pethuamet nor in the surrounding grassy area. Then he noticed a faint blue light flickering amidst the piece of severed tongue soaked in black body fluid.

“Ah, here…”

He hurriedly picked it up, but the light flickered once more before going out completely, never to return.

“…”

‘Damn it.’ An unspoken curse lingered in his mouth for a moment before disappearing.

‘But I didn’t see it wrong. I can’t show this to Lorna, but I have to tell her.’

This was definitive evidence that supported his speculation that Pethuamet was a monster that absorbed magic power. However, seeing Lorna so engrossed in studying the magic circle, his original plan to show her the severed tongue and explain his theory suddenly changed.

‘…To what extent will she actually believe and consider what I say?’

They had been discussing the possibility of a magic-power-absorbing monster just before Pethuamet appeared. Even if he said that such a monster seemed to have actually appeared now, he had a strong premonition that she might dismiss it as a misunderstanding or view it as an attempt to disrupt her research.

‘To that mage, the most important thing is the continuation of her ongoing Magic Spring research. She wouldn’t welcome any topic that could potentially interrupt it.’

Nevertheless, Yuder had no doubt that he wasn’t mistaken. The light he saw had the same color as part of the magic circle that flickered from Pethuamet’s severed tongue in his dream last night. He glanced at the tongue in his hand before hastily stuffing it into his pocket.

‘I’ll have to take this and show it to Micalin. It would be better if the same kind of monster doesn’t appear again.’

However, his bad premonition usually turned out to be accurate in such cases. After stopping the restoration of the magic circle, going into the Magic Spring, verifying that it looked no different from yesterday, and coming out again, they encountered another Pethuamet.

“It’s the same monster from before!”

It was smaller than the Pethuamet they had killed earlier. Yuder killed it again with his sword, protecting Lorna as they quickly returned to their base.

They headed straight to Micalin and began reporting what had happened that day. Yuder, who had merely listened to Lorna’s reports a step behind her the day before, did not do the same today. After her lengthy explanation about the magic circle and the Magic Spring, and her brief addition about the monster, he went out with her, but soon snuck back to Micalin on his own.

Micalin, who had been busy checking his books, looked puzzled when he saw Yuder.

“Hmm? Do you have something more to say?”

“Yes. I have something personal to discuss regarding what happened today.”

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Chapter 279

The elderly mage put down the book he was holding and removed his glasses.

“Go on.”

“I’m going to discuss the monster we encountered today.”

Yuder didn’t stretch out his explanation. He briefly shared his observations - the behavior of the Pethuamet, its voracious appetite, the traces it constantly left while prowling around the magic circles and the ruins, and even the shimmering light from its tongue as it tried to swallow the magic stone. After explaining all that he had seen, he succinctly conveyed his conjecture.

“…I think this monster possesses the ability to absorb magic, as you’ve mentioned before. Although I’ve managed to kill two of them, there may be more hidden or could appear in the future. We need to respond quickly.”

“If that’s the case, there’s a high likelihood it truly is a magic-absorbing monster. By response, you mean… extermination?”

The astute mage was quick on the uptake. However, Yuder’s objective was not merely about extermination.

“Yes. We need to find out how many more are in the forest and deal with them. I can handle that alone. However… I’d like to request that, in anticipation of any possible scenarios, apart from basic protection magic, we cease all other magic circle activities and momentarily deactivate them.”

“Deactivate the magic circles?”

“Yes. Not only because of the monsters, but there are other reasons too…”

A momentary twitch appeared at the corners of Micalin’s wrinkled eyes.

“That’s problematic.”

Cutting off Yuder’s words, the elderly mage answered firmly, a low chuckle escaping his lips moments later.

“Look here. You may have learned a little about magic since coming here, but magic circles aren’t so easily deactivated and reinstalled on a whim. If anything, pushing for a swift recovery might work, but deactivation is out of the question.”

“So you’re saying it’s entirely impossible to deactivate.”

“It’s not about impossibility. If you deactivate the amplification circle set up there, all the effort we’ve put in thus far would go down the drain. It would mean restarting the research that has taken considerable money, time, and manpower to bring to this point. Do you think you can handle that?”

Micalin shook his head, murmuring “That’s not going to happen.”

“You said the monster is very weak. I don’t think we need to go that far.”

“I understand your concerns. But in a situation where we have no time to properly recover the damaged circles, what if the monster absorbs even a part of the amplification circle? Then… it won’t be just a weak monster anymore.”

“You’ve got quite an imagination. This isn’t a matter for the Awakener to decide, but for us mages who understand magic. Let’s leave it at that.”

It wasn’t mere imagination. In his previous life, this might have actually happened. But Micalin made it clear he didn’t want to talk about it any further. By mentioning the Awakener and mages at the same time, he implied that Yuder’s actions were being seen as excessive interference, an overstep of his bounds.

Their hard-earned trust was at risk. Provoking him further wasn’t a good move.

‘I understand, but…’

Still, Micalin’s attitude was disappointing. His somewhat changed demeanor from when they had promised cooperation before triggered Yuder’s past memories. After defeating Pethuamet and witnessing Kishiar’s figure swaying on the crumbling cliff, he had to take a deep breath to regain his composure. As he opened his eyes after a brief close, the surged emotions consumed his heart like flames.

‘Indeed, stepping back just won’t do.’

Yuder opened his mouth once more.

“I understand your perspective, Leader. But may I add one more thing?”

“As long as it’s not about abandoning the amplification circle, feel free.”

“This is a continuation of the cooperative discussion we had a few days ago.”

Carefully observing any minor changes on Micalin’s face, which looked somewhat colder than before, Yuder spoke.

“Both the Leader and we agreed that there may be a connection between the strange cracks and monster anomalies observed in the

Great Sarain Forest and the Magic Spring, and we decided to cooperate. Do you remember?”

“I may be old, but my mind is still sharp.”

“The period when the cracks began to be observed coincides with the time when the amplification circle was completed and changes began to occur at the Magic Spring. It’s also roughly the same time when the monsters began to act unusually.”

Yuder continued his train of thought.

“If all of these are indeed related, shouldn’t we naturally consider the amplification circle that triggered the changes in the ruins?”

“That’s…”

The expression swiftly drained from Micalin’s face. Yuder watched him, sensing his great discomfort and anger at the mere mention of the amplification circle, but forcing it down.

“Since problems arose with the amplification circle surrounding the Magic Spring, new cracks have not been observed and the monster anomalies have not recurred. I can’t deny that there’s some correlation in all of these events. What do you think, Leader?”

In the two days of receiving reports from Lorna and reorganizing the base, Micalin, as the Leader, would have speculated similarly to Yuder. The evidence was clear in his gaze. However, he had kept silent all this while, even promptly changing the subject when Yuder brought up the amplification circle due to the monsters. In the end, he too was a mage who prioritized research.

Everything was connected. The magic power from the Magic Spring, the Great Sarain Forest, the amplification circle that changed the Magic Spring, and the subsequent appearance of cracks and monster anomalies. If traced back, all these events led to the mages’

research. Would they have to disregard the amplification circle and abandon the research simply because it was a waste?

The answer was clear. The ones turning a blind eye were the mages.

“I didn’t bring up the amplification circle merely because of the appearance of monsters absorbing magic. You, Leader, and the Western Mage Union have already suffered significant damages due to the monsters’ anomalies. But let’s also consider the other countries and imperial citizens in the western area who have suffered even greater damages, and continue to do so. We all know what the priority is now. It’ll be too late once something else happens.”

Yuder had said something similar when he first met Micalin and requested his cooperation. However, unlike then, Micalin didn’t say anything, his brow furrowed.

The situation had changed so much that they might have to start the ongoing research from the beginning, or perhaps stop it altogether. His demeanor had changed so drastically just with the addition of this harsh reality. Within his piercing, eagle-like amber eyes, numerous worries surged like waves.

“…It’s difficult to give an immediate answer.”

In the end, Micalin had turned away from Yuder’s gaze.

“Would it not have been better if you asked to understand the principles behind the magic circle near the Magic Spring, the geography of the Great Sarain Forest, or offered swift assistance in monster subjugation? But the amplification circle… I did not anticipate having to intervene that far. There are too many here who stake everything on the outcome it could bring. I can immediately cooperate on anything else, but I need you to understand that it’s difficult to decide this matter on my own.”

“Didn’t you say that it is shameful to turn a blind eye to what happens in the pursuit of truth? Yet you are saying this now?”

At the pointed comment, the ends of Micalin’s pale brows trembled. The elderly mage was fiercely conflicted between his own shame, the intensely desired research objectives, and the audacious young man standing before him, eventually bowing his head.

“Was it not agreed that detailed cooperation would be discussed when your companions return, not now? It is not that time yet.”

“…”

“Please leave.”

The order to leave was finally issued. Yuder closed his mouth and turned around.

‘If Kishiar and the others return as promised tomorrow, I’ll start with this discussion.’

There was a possibility that Micalin and the mages of the Western Mage Union could completely reverse their cooperative stance before their return. Feeling a bit sorry at the thought that the returning Cavalry members might be dumbfounded or disappointed, Yuder decided not to regret the words he had just spat out to Micalin.

‘After all, it might have been strange to hope everything would go smoothly with a partnership gained through a mere introductory letter from Thais Yulman.’

The mages weren’t bad people. Both Lorna and Micalin were quite reasonable and intelligent. It was just that he hadn’t properly understood that their reasonableness was only in areas outside of their research.

‘So, this situation was bound to happen.’

If even Micalin, who was in charge of this place, couldn't be convinced, there was no chance for things to improve through conversation with those under his sway. If Micalin were to completely refuse cooperation afterward, it seemed better to handle the work alone, as he always had, rather than hoping for cooperation with them.

Moving alone had been his forte since his previous life. It was much more comfortable for Yuder than considering others.

However, he couldn't easily quell his troubled feelings.

'Have I become weak?'

It was worrisome. Now, more than ever, was a time when strength was needed. Yuder sighed, rolling the last piece of candy in his pocket with his fingers.

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Chapter 280

‘What would Kishiar have done?’

He wondered if Kishiar, rather than himself, had been here, could he have convinced Lorna and Micalin? Despite assuring himself that this situation was the best possible outcome, an unsettling feeling of failure continued to intermittently surface.

Yuder was fumbling with a piece of candy when he stopped, finding a bulky object that filled his opposite pocket. In the heat of the conversation, he had completely forgotten about the Pethuamet’s tongue he had stashed away.

‘I was going to show it to Micalin… Now it’s useless.’

The chunk of tongue he pulled out was hard and black, looking like a charred piece of wood. He contemplated throwing it away, but he was too late in sensing someone approaching him from behind.

“Sir Yuder, what are you doing here?”

Turning around, he found Priest Lusan standing there. Despite his fatigued complexion, Lusan showed a genuine smile of pleasure at seeing Yuder.

“I was just having a chat with the Union Leader. How about you, Priest…?”

“I’ve just finished tending to the critical patients and had some food. Finally, I can breathe a little.”

Lusan, who had answered, then lowered his head toward the Pethuamet’s tongue in Yuder’s hand.

“But what is that? It smells rather unpleasant…”

“It’s a tongue I cut from a monster.”

“Wha-?! A tongue?”

Lusan took a step back in surprise.

“Why are you carrying such a horrid thing around? You must know that the corpse of a monster is almost poison itself…”

“I’m wearing protective gloves, so it’s fine.”

Upon seeing the black gloves Yuder always wore, Lusan muttered, “Uh, hmm. I see. But even so…”

“You really need to be careful handling the bodies of monsters. Even if your hands weren’t in the state they are… Uh-hum. Hmm. Anyway, we’re the only two here, so you should be more careful.”

In Lusan’s familiar worried gaze, there was an unmistakable sense of closeness. The warmth he radiated was born out of a shared sentiment towards the only other person left with him here. Only then did Yuder fully realize he was not left here alone. A sense of warmth began to return to his previously cold body.

“…I see. Thank you.”

“Haha, you’re welcome. But what on earth are you planning to do with that tongue?”

Yuder alternately looked at the Pethuamet’s tongue and Lusan’s face. He hesitated, wondering if he should speak, but then his mouth opened naturally.

“It’s not for my use. I just… I was wondering if this might be the reason our cooperation with the mages comes to an end.”

“Huh?”

Lusan asked again, as if he had misheard.

“While I was focused on healing, what on earth happened… No, let’s not talk here. Let’s go somewhere quiet and discuss this. Oh. Right. Please tell me in our quarters. That would be better.”

Although he suggested this, Lusan, who had spent the last two days sleeping by the patients’ side, didn’t even know where their quarters were. So, Yuder had to lead him. Lusan, sitting awkwardly on the bed, clenched his fists and took a deep breath, only to jump up in shock when he spotted a bloodstain on the floor.

“What’s this blood? Did you get hurt?”

Yuder recognized the blood he had discovered as traces left by assassins the night before. He realized he ought to inform Lusan about this.

“No, it’s not my blood. It’s the blood of assassins who infiltrated last night.”

“Assassins…? Surely, you mean…?”

Lusan’s eyes trembled uncontrollably as he mouthed, “They were after the Second Prince of Nelarn, weren’t they?” Yuder nodded, assuring him that there was no need to worry as he had already dealt with the assassins, who were now sleeping soundly in the basement of a nearby building. More importantly, there were the circumstances that Yuder had discovered while following the mages to the Magic Spring.

While Yuder explained the things he had seen and experienced following the mages to the Magic Spring, Lusan listened attentively without interruption until the end. Finally, after he had finished recounting the appearance of the monster today and the

conversation with Micalin, the room fell silent again. Yuder, observing Lusan deep in thought, gently broke the silence.

“The situation is as it stands, but you should continue with your duties. There’s no need to be overly concerned…”

“So, you’re just planning to observe the situation until the Commander and the group return?”

Lusan interrupted Yuder’s words with a soft question. His clear, green eyes, reminiscent of tender sprouts, stared directly at him.

“Isn’t that so?”

“…”

Of course, it wasn’t. Despite failing to persuade Micalin, considering the unpredictable whereabouts of Pethuamet, he absolutely couldn’t stand idly by. He planned to slip away in the cover of evening darkness, heading again toward the Magic Spring, and it seemed as though Lusan had read his mind, nodding in affirmation.

“I thought as much.”

“…I plan to visit the Magic Spring tonight. I can’t leave a monster that absorbs magic roaming around.”

“You’ll go even if I advise against it due to the danger, won’t you?”

“Yes.”

Upon hearing the firm response, Lusan’s expression grew serious.

“I thought so after hearing your story, but as I expected… you’re uncompromising when it comes to doing what you believe is right.

Ah, don’t get me wrong, that’s a compliment.”

Compromise. Considering his relationship with the mages, it might have been wiser to compromise and patiently wait for a night. However, as the only person who knew about the potential danger Pethuamet might bring to this world, Yuder absolutely couldn’t do that.

‘There’s no guarantee that the result of compromise won’t lead to a future similar to my previous life.’

As he fell silent with these thoughts, Lusan scratched under his chin and cast his gaze downward.

“I’ve seen and heard things while treating the injured mages here. That’s why I think I understand why the head of this place has stepped back. I’ve never seen people who are as dedicated to their research as the people here.”

“…”

“But I don’t think you need to step back because of that. The reason the Cavalry came this far is to help the many people who might be suffering due to the monster outbreaks in the West, isn’t it? What you’re trying to do now is also for that.”

Lusan met Yuder’s gaze with a resolute look in his eyes.

“In truth… After hearing your speculation, Sir Yuder, I was reminded of a verse from Chapter 1 of the Sacred Text. As you know, the text teaches the fairness of light, always warning against any disturbances to balance. Would it not be natural for the other side to react in response when one side of the heavenly scales wavers? It might not be strange to think that the unsettling of the balance of the Magic Spring that has been present for a long time could result in such consequences.”

Yuder’s eyes widened slightly. The idea that the disturbance of the Magic Spring’s balance had led to these results intriguingly stimulated his senses. It was a frustrating feeling, as though the answer was just out of reach.

“And now, I too am part of the Cavalry. How could I not be concerned? If there is any way I can help, of course, I will do my part. Just let me know.”

Lusan, who had added these words with a hint of embarrassment, wore a determined expression. Yuder found this unfamiliar, creating a strange sensation as he looked upon Lusan’s face.

Priest Lusan was someone he had never encountered in his past life. He had chanced upon him during a plan to topple the Apeto Family, and his exceptional divine power caught the attention of Kishiar, leading to his appointment. After joining the medical division, he had often received praise for getting along well with Enon and the other members, unlike his previous haughty demeanor as a member of the Temple of the Sun God.

Yuder had never paid much attention to Lusan in his past life, as he had never met him. But in contrast, the fact that Lusan, who had no previous association with him, unreservedly trusted him as a comrade from the same unit made him acutely aware of the difference between his past life and the present.

As his self-doubt and anxiety faded away, his mind seemed to function more efficiently than before. Gathering his thoughts, he expressed his gratitude to Lusan.

“Thank you. Even your words just now could be of great help.”

“Ah, no. It’s not as though I’ve said anything particularly insightful…”

“No, you’re mistaken. If you, Priest, had not been consistently dedicated in helping the union mages here, we wouldn’t have been able to get this far in the first place.”

At those words, Lusan’s cheeks flushed momentarily. He scratched his head, avoiding Yuder’s gaze.

“Well… It’s embarrassing to hear you say that. In truth, I wasn’t particularly altruistic or anything… I used to be criticized at the temple for not acting like a proper priest. If I appeared dedicated, it was only because I wanted to be helpful in your mission.”

Lusan’s face, as he softly confessed that he had felt nervous about sounding presumptuous, having recently joined as a Priest, was overflowing with happy emotions.

“So, please tell me if there is anything real I can help with. Quickly.”

Looking at Lusan’s eager face, Yuder took a moment to contemplate. The young Priest didn’t seem like he would back down. Lusan, too, was now a member of the Cavalry, so why should he exclude a colleague and make things difficult for himself? While he couldn’t bring the young Priest, who seemed not to have fully adapted to the energy of the great forest outside, there was plenty he could do inside. For instance…

“Understood. For today, could you help me keep the fact that I have been going in and out a secret? And, if possible, could you inquire about the research being conducted in the Western Mage Union among the other mages… Is that something you can do?”

“I can, but is that all you need?”

Yuder silently gave a small nod.

“Consider whether there might be more I can assist with before you depart. Oh, and before that, please have your hand healed. Just in case.”

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Chapter 281

The task Yuder had entrusted to Lusan was far more critical than he had initially anticipated. The mages, though they had received help from Yuder, an Awakener, had failed to eradicate their inherent skepticism and vigilance. However, their attitudes in the presence of the Priest were different. With Lusan, who had supported them without expecting anything in return, there was a high likelihood of learning new information they had not known before.

To receive healing from Lusan, Yuder removed his gloves. He had been exerting himself for several days, but his spots hadn't spread much, and their color was faint. However, the power that had been continuously manifesting strongly after presumably absorbing power from Kishiar had now stabilized to a level no different from usual, seeming to have run its course.

'Considering myself as a medium… It might be as if all the absorbed power inside me has been depleted.'

Would absorbing more of the power stored inside Kishiar return him to a state where his power manifested strongly as before? Or would there be other changes? As he pondered this and watched Lusan extend his hand for healing, Yuder suddenly turned his head at the sound of rough footsteps outside the door.

"Priest! Priest! Are you here?"

"Yes, I'm here. What's the matter?"

As Lusan responded, Yuder quickly put his gloves back on. The door opened, and a mage poked his head in, shouting urgently.

"The ones who went out to inspect the magic circle were attacked by a monster! They're in serious condition. Could you come and see

them right away, please?”

The mage’s hands were smeared with blood. Lusan’s complexion changed.

“A monster attack. Has there been another anomaly?”

“No. It’s just one monster. It was a tiny creature at first, but it kept growing and getting stronger with each attack. They said it wouldn’t die no matter how much they attacked it with magic tools. Eventually, someone was wounded by a spike on its tail and ran back here. It seems like it was venomous…”

He didn’t need to hear more. It was Pethuamet.

Just as in his previous life, the same event was happening.

“…Priest Lusan. I think you may need to forget the discussion we just had.”

Yuder whispered softly so that only Lusan could hear, then turned away. In the looming darkness of the Great Sarain Forest, the branches swayed ominously.

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“Urgh, arrgh…”

“Stay with me! Where’s the antidote? What? That was the last one?”

“Have they found the Priest yet?”

“They found him! He’s here!”

The only remaining intact building at the base was a pandemonium of injured people and mages who had gathered around them. Yuder followed the mage who was leading Lusan,

scanning the surroundings. Micalin, the leader who was anxiously moving around the center, shouted loudly when he saw Lusan.

“Everyone, make way for Priest immediately.”

As the mages stepped aside, a path was cleared for Lusan to approach the injured. Yuder, looking past them, was taken aback to see the face of a mage gasping for breath. Lorna, who had been having a normal conversation with him just a few hours ago, lay there with a face darkened by the venom.

“Her condition is serious. I’ll try using my divine power for now, but we need to simultaneously proceed with extracting the venom from her blood.”

“I’ll help with that.”

Yuder rolled up his sleeves and stepped forward. He was likely more competent at this task than the inexperienced mages. Seeing Yuder’s face, Micalin’s lips tightened, but he didn’t say anything.

Yuder unsheathed a dagger someone had given him and cut across Lorna’s arm where a wound from the tail of the Pethuamet remained. The dark blood that had been slowly seeping out began to rapidly pour, pooling on the floor. Fortunately, it hadn’t been long since she was wounded, so after some time, the color of the blood became clearer. Upon confirming this, Lusan poured even more of his divine power and several mages completed a detoxification spell, giving strength. Gradually, Lorna’s complexion began to regain its color.

Around that time, Yuder stood up and faced Micalin.

“Why is she injured? Didn’t you already go into the forest during the day?”

“…After our conversation, I thought I needed to inspect the place myself.”

Micalin mumbled, supporting his head. It was only then that Yuder noticed the blood, dirt, and wounds that marred his clothes and hands, unlike before.

“I took Lorna and a few other mages who had been continuously examining the place. While observing the control array, the monster you spoke of appeared. We attacked it with a magic tool and killed it. After hurriedly cleaning up its remains and preparing to complete the check, we realized… “

As the Pethuamet received attacks, it slowly inflated. Despite the mages’ attempts to kill it, the monster unhesitatingly devoured the materials and magic power that formed the magic circle. When Lorna, remembering too late that Yuder had killed the monster by cutting its tongue, was injured as she stepped forward, and the arrival of other monsters attracted by the Pethuamet’s cry was sensed, the mages had no choice but to retreat hastily.

Micalin’s eyes twisted with self-reproach as he recounted the events that had unfolded as Yuder had predicted.

“It seems that every time the monster absorbs magic or other power, it uses it for physical amplification. Ordinarily, the body should explode when it expands beyond a certain limit, but because of the power of protection circle superimposed on the amplification circle we created, that limit has probably been extended beyond comparison…”

Then, a gloomy howl and vibration were felt from a distance. As Micalin closed his mouth, everyone’s gaze anxiously turned toward the outside of the building.

“It seems to be following us here soon… The Priest and you stay inside and assess the situation. We will prepare to respond.”

Even as Micalin spoke of response, he did not believe that the Western Mage Alliance, full of injured and unable to fully restore the defensive magic circle, could withstand the Pethuamet. Seeing this, the mages also wore dark expressions, as if accepting their fate.

Yuder, looking down at Micalin's battered hand, calmly asked,

"Before you last retreated, how large was the monster?"

"Why do you ask?"

"This place is full of magic circles and magic power that the monster can devour. It would be better to go out and lure it to the opposite side before it grows too big to handle."

"If it can be done, it would be better. But who are you suggesting should take such a dangerous task in the Great Sarain Forest after dark? He'd be lucky not to die before even luring it."

"I will do it."

In an instant, the surrounding mages collectively held their breath.

"…Did you, not hear what I just said?"

Micalin clutched his throbbing head as he questioned,

"No matter how powerful an Awakener you may be, or even though you predicted a situation where such a monster might appear, you are not invincible. I have my own pride and dignity. It's our responsibility, not yours!"

"But staying here passively won't guarantee safety either."

His words were chilly but held truth. Micalin could not deny it.

“If we try to confront a monster that only grows bigger when attacked, while leaving a place full of the wounded behind, it’s even more dangerous. The patients can’t even run away on their own.”

Yuder glanced around. The mages seemed perplexed by his words.

“I don’t think I can defeat it all on my own. Therefore, I need your help.”

“…You really think you can defeat that thing outside?”

One of the more familiar mages stammered in a trembling voice.

“How in the world…”

“We have to deal with it while it’s still small, so we can’t afford to waste time. I will go out immediately and find that monster. While I draw its attention and make it chase me, you should clean up the other monsters that swallowed the amplification circle and find the highest point in this area.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

“…Why are you going so far?”

Micalin asked, his wrinkled eyes filled with an indiscernible emotion, amidst the mages who looked utterly bewildered.

“Are you not angry with us? Even if you said you’d go out with the Priest alone, we wouldn’t have been able to say anything. Why take on the most dangerous task…”

“If you find a spark that could turn into a wildfire, it’s best to extinguish it while it’s still small.”

A calm voice devoid of much emotion flowed out.

“And I’m just a person who’s a bit better at putting out fires than you. I wasn’t particularly angry with anyone.”

Of course, he was a little disappointed, but that was it. It was okay because the current Pethuamet didn’t cause the same massive damage as in his previous life. Although he was weak when dealing with monsters, he was confident enough to confront Pethuamet at his current size, thanks to his experience from his previous life.

“So, is there anyone willing to help?”

At Yuder’s question, the mages looked at each other. After a moment, volunteers began raising their hands and voicing out, “I’ll do it.”

During the short time that the volunteers were deciding their roles, Yuder took a black lump from his pocket and handed it to Micalin, who still had a complex expression on his face.

“What is this?”

“It’s the tongue that I cut from the monster I mentioned earlier.”

Micalin nearly dropped the black lump in surprise but managed to catch it.

“A tongue, you say?”

“The tongue that had swallowed a magic stone and emitted light before going out. I don’t know much about it, but as a great mage, I thought you might be able to find something out, so I brought it.”

At Yuder’s words, Micalin sharply scrutinized the black lump. After a while, he let out an audible sigh.

“…If traces of it are still in here, we might be able to deactivate the amplification circle that the monster outside has absorbed.”

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“Is that really possible?”

Surprised by the unexpected words, Yuder looked towards Micalin who slowly nodded in confirmation.

“If it were any other magic, it would have been difficult, but we created the amplification circle, so we can interpret the remaining information much faster. This is, of course, assuming that there are still remnants left… but if we simply confirm… We’d have to look into it more thoroughly to be sure, but I don’t believe it’s nonsense.”

Throughout his explanation, Micalin took frequent short pauses, seemingly engrossed in rapid thought. Finally, with a determined expression, he turned his body.

“Pause the conversation!”

His voice rose towards the group of mages who had been diligently dividing their roles in a circle, causing the noise to lessen as all eyes shifted toward him. Holding up the tongue of the Pethuamet in his hand, Micalin briefly explained its identity and called out several mages by name.

“You all can probably guess why I called your names.”

“Do you intend to find the remnants within it?”

“Yes, we can’t afford to waste any time. We need to find out before the power of amplification absorbed by the monster becomes too immense.”

The mages Micalin had called were deeply involved in the development of the amplification circle with him. Realizing his

intention, their expressions hardened, shifting through a range of emotions.

“But, Leader. Even if we extract the information, we need a large amount of magic power and a controller to disable it. With our current shortage of personnel, how can we…”

“We don’t need to worry about the magic power. Isn’t it already here with us?”

At Micalin’s heavy retort, the eyes of the mages widened. A profound shock coursed through them like lightning.

“Do you intend to use the Magic Spring?”

“Yes.”

“But then, all the magic power we’ve amplified until now…!”

Micalin’s sharp gaze fixed onto a mage who couldn’t help but exclaim.

“Weren’t you all just willing to risk your lives to help those who might die trying to put out a forest fire? Was that a lie?”

“…”

“We can always seize an opportunity if we’re alive, but what can we truly gain after losing our honor and lives?”

The mages remained silent. From afar, the ominous sound of something exploding, accompanied by a low, mournful howl, echoed alongside the vibrations.

“The most pressing issue right now is to deal with the situation at hand. If we let others handle the issue caused by the amplification circle we created, even if we survive, the honor of our Western Mage Union will never be restored. Remember this.”

After his final words, Micalin immediately moved to the upper floor with those he had called. The remaining mages split into two groups; one to guard the base, and the other to move with Yuder.

“Sir Yuder! My apologies. I would have liked to accompany you, but I’m not confident about navigating through the forest at night…”

“Don’t worry. You don’t need to be so concerned.”

Chasing after Yuder who was ready to head out, Priest Lusan wore a face full of worry.

“Still, just in case, take this.”

What he handed over, out of sight from the mages, was a small cloth pouch.

“It’s filled with pills made from herbs that Mr. Enon gave me, and some of the Holy Water I brought. They’re effective against venoms and wounds.”

As he took the pouch from the other’s hand, Yuder felt its significant weight. Silently, he slipped it into the pocket inside his coat and bowed his head in gratitude.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m sorry I couldn’t give more… Please remember that your safety is paramount. You should be cautious, especially if the situation becomes dire. But remember, there are others with you.”

Upon hearing Lusan’s words, faces of his comrades, whom he hadn’t considered in the light of an urgent situation, flashed through his mind. By the time the night passed and the dawn broke, it would be time for Kishiar to return as promised.

Were they, by now, on their way back after delivering Ejain to its destination?

Had they encountered enemies or monsters along the way?

Would Kishiar be alright?

“…Yes. I will be careful.”

After mentally erasing the last expression he had seen on the other’s face, Yuder quietly turned away. The mages, who had agreed to synchronize their movements with him, followed him with solemn expressions.

Yuder’s goal was to sort out the situation before Kishiar returned. However, as always, things didn’t necessarily go as desired.

–-

Yuder left the protective magic circle that encased their base, heading toward the Magic Spring along the established route. Before long, a few tiny Pethuamets appeared, but he left them to the mages to take care of and continued moving without delay.

The roaring of monsters and booming noises that had been audible even inside the building now echoed continuously in his ears as he stepped outside. The sounds were terrifying; the surrounding Great Sarain Forest was trembling and the landscape was crumbling.

Although the mages faltered as if frightened, Yuder didn’t hesitate. He urged them to quicken their pace while he listened to a brief description of the local landscape. The information he wanted was the location of the highest ground nearby.

“If we go further north from here, there’s a high hill. Of course, the path up there is entangled with trees, making it not easy, but among

the rocky terrains, it’s the highest.”

“It seems quite close to the Magic Spring.”

“Yes. It’s near. But it’s the highest place we could lure it to right now. To find higher ground, we’d need to travel… about a day more.”

That was undoubtedly too far. Acknowledging this, Yuder listened intently to the gloomy roars and explosive sounds of something being crushed and shattered that came from not too far away. It didn’t seem too distant.

‘I thought the creature would have come straight to the base, but it seems to have changed direction for some reason. It has gone further than expected.’

“When we last saw it, it was about the size of a small horse. It must have consumed all sorts of things on its way here, so who knows how big it’s now…”

A mage, who had gone with Micalin and Lorna to examine the magic circle, murmured nervously. He had been speculating the entire time that the reason for Pethuamet’s voracious appetite was its ability to absorb small amounts of magic power present in everything.

“There’s no need to be anxious. If we encounter the monster, please act as I advised earlier.”

“Understood.”

Yuder intended to launch an attack the moment he encountered the Pethuamet. Like other monsters, the Pethuamet was not a creature capable of advanced thought. Creatures guided solely by their instincts would primarily pursue anything that attacked them or annoyed them.

Therefore, Yuder had asked the other mages not to attack Pethuamet. Even if it was a small Pethuamet that hadn't absorbed the magic circle or any other monsters, Yuder had to take care of it by himself.

Of course, a direct attack might not work with Yuder's power, but there were many geographical features of the forest that could serve as weapons alongside his sword. The larger the Pethuamet grew, due to the many obstacles, the more its movement would be restrained, which would be more advantageous for Yuder.

"That direction. I can still hear loud noises."

Then, another mage who had gone a little ahead pointed in one direction.

"But it's… It sounds too noisy for a monster."

"Surely not. It must be a mistake. Who could be here at this hour…"

"But isn't that fire…?"

Alongside a suspicious mumble of one of the mages, a sudden red light flashed from beyond the forest. At the same time, the monster's roar echoed loudly again. The earth vibrated, causing the entire forest to tremble, and the mages swallowed their groans, holding onto the trees.

"There was no mention of that monster being able to spew fire!"

'No, that's not the power of Pethuamet…'

Yuder squinted at the light. A strange hunch had come upon him.

"Wha, where are you going!"

"I'll go ahead. Please, slowly follow while looking around."

“What did you say?”

Leaving the mages behind, Yuder began to run as if stepping on the wind. Every time he swung his hand, the trees bent their bodies laboriously to create a vacant space for him. His fingertips tingled, and soon his destination came into view.

Yuder swallowed his breath and stopped.

The first sight he saw was Pethuamet, which had grown to the size of a small house. Every time its massive tail cut through the air, all the nearby trees melted and shattered, creating a wide ruin that resembled a clearing.

And in front of it, several people were struggling to combat the monster.

“What the hell! How do we bring down such a goddamn monster!”

“Digon! Stop using that damn fire! If the forest burns completely because of you, what will happen to our village!”

“Didn’t you hear me? Lure it somewhere else, you dimwits! Stop sending it this way!”

The ones swearing at each other didn’t seem to be professionally trained knights or mages. They varied in age and gender. But when Pethuamet spewed its body fluid to attack, they each demonstrated their abilities and retreated in an instant. A defensive wall made of fire and water flashed and radiated light.

‘…Awakeners.’

He realized right away. They were Awakeners.

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Yuder sensed their intent to attack Pethuamet once again and flew into action. He simultaneously blocked attacks from both sides with a wall of water and wind, which caused smoke to billow into the sky and momentarily eased the situation. It took more strength than usual, but it seemed to have prevented things from worsening, which was fortunate.

“A mage, perhaps?”

“No, an Awakener!”

“Who are you?”

Seeing Yuder suddenly reveal himself, the startled Awakeners drew back defensively. As they did, Yuder studied them closely and asked quietly.

“I should be the one asking. Who are you, and why are you battling this monster here?”

From their immediate skepticism that he was a mage, it seemed likely that they were aware of the presence of Western Mage Union mages. However, their identities were still unclear. Upon hearing Yuder’s question, one of the Awakeners cautiously began to reply.

“We were just… trying to prevent that creature from approaching our village, so we lured it here…”

“Shut your trap, and keep quiet!”

“But if he’s also an Awakener, we don’t really need to…”

“I said shut up!”

Another awakener forcefully struck the back of the one who had spoken. But by then, they had already revealed enough.

‘A village, they say? Do they live here? If so…’

Judging by their ordinary attire, it seemed plausible that they were the displaced civilians Lorna had mentioned. But could such a large group of Awakeners be simply considered displaced civilians? As silent glances of suspicion were exchanged, another group came to Yuder’s mind, one that he might guess from his memory.

‘…Could it be?’

Before coming to the West, Kanna had gleaned information from the Star of Nagran brothers, Gayle and Doyle, that one of their bases was nearby.

Yuder quickly shook off the image of the burned face of Nahan, the first image that came to mind when thinking about the Star of Nagran, and frowned. If these people were truly from the Star of Nagran, the timing was incredibly tricky. He wanted to confirm more clearly, but with Pethuamet again growling threateningly, he decided to postpone the conversation for later. Turning his back on the Awakeners, Yuder spoke out loud.

“Cease your attacks and withdraw. This monster grows larger with every attack. From now on, I will be the one dealing with it.”

“We know that the damned thing grows with every attack, but how the hell are you going to kill it on your own? Do you have some sort of brilliant plan?”

The oldest looking of the Awakeners, a squint-eyed man, asked. Instead of responding, Yuder drew his sword and blocked Pethuamet’s swinging tail with the power of wind.

Rather than clashing with flesh, it felt more like colliding with a slab of metal, his body forcefully thrust backward amidst the loud noise. The pressure transmitted through his sword made him grit his teeth involuntarily. Even though it was still small compared to the size of the creatures he had faced in his previous life, the force was tremendous, enough to slightly bury his heels into the ground. As Pethuamet, seemingly surprised by the unexpected force exerted by a small human, momentarily halted its movements, Yuder shifted his gaze toward the man who had asked the question.

“I believe this should suffice as an answer.”

“He’s really holding it off alone…”

Turning to the astonished murmur coming from behind him, Yuder spotted the mages from the Western Mage Union who had belatedly followed and yelled out to them.

“The target has been identified. We will begin luring it soon. Please stand clear!”

“Understood! But who are those people over… gah!”

The mages, who had widened their eyes in disbelief upon spotting the Awakeners, screamed instinctively and scattered as they turned and saw Pethuamet, having sensed the arrival of a new enemy. Pethuamet had begun to slowly lumber after them with a thud-thud noise.

‘This can’t happen.’

The mages had planned to deal with the other monsters in the vicinity as soon as Yuder encountered Pethuamet. They would then move forward and use magic to change the color of the leaves in the trees above the path to their destination, guiding the way. Yuder glanced at the Awakeners after a moment, noticing a tree not far away whose upper leaves had turned golden.

“We’ll talk later. If you are willing to help us kill this monster, please assist the mages with the other monsters. If not, please stand back so as not to interfere.”

“What, what did you say?”

“What will you do?”

The Awakeners, looking at each other’s faces again, focused their attention on the squint-eyed man. Muttering a curse under his breath, the man made a decision, responding, “Alright.”

“If you fail, it’s going to head to our village next, so we don’t have a choice. Damn it, what kind of situation is this? Anyway, if you say you can kill it, let’s talk after it’s over.”

If Yuder were the same as when he only knew about Nahan, he would never have asked these dubious people from Star of Nagran for help, no matter how urgent the situation was. But he remembered the face of Kanna, who had given him information about the brothers Gayle and Doyle. After becoming Awakeners, the brothers had been shunned by those around them. They had joined the ranks of the Star of Nagran as they wandered around starving. He couldn’t be unconditionally hostile with this information.

They seemed to have run into this situation unprepared, and he decided to focus on the fact that they had more volunteers to help deal with Pethuamet. Apologies to the mages of the Western Mage Union, but a ragtag group of awkwardly gathered Awakeners seemed far better than mages who could hardly handle attack magic.

Yuder postponed making a judgment on the situation, instead leaping into the wind and slashing down on Pethuamet’s head with his sword. A scream filled the air as black blood splattered. Eyes slit vertically were filled with a burning hatred as they glared at Yuder.

His entire body prickled with intense murderous intent, causing him to instinctively shrink back. However, Yuder shook off the sensation with a quick deep breath. Holding his sword ready, he scanned the path marked by the gleaming golden leaves above his head. The darkness was thick in the Great Sarain Forest, making it difficult to even locate his allies nearby, but the purple venom leaking from Pethuamet's body was bright enough to be eye-watering. At least, he thought, it was a blessing that he couldn't lose sight of his target in the dark.

"Alright… watch me."

He hadn't been able to kill it in his previous life, but this time would be different.

In this life, it wouldn't be Kishiar who killed Pethuamet. It would be him.

As Pethuamet began to follow him, Yuder launched an attack while retreating. Harnessing the power of the wind, he rapidly shifted positions. The essence of this luring operation was to deal the real attacks with his sword.

Though it stung his pride to imitate the movements he had seen from Kishiar in his previous life, the method certainly worked like a charm. Pethuamet stopped chasing the others and started following Yuder alone.

Every time the monstrous figure of Pethuamet collided with the gigantic trees, they shattered and snapped with tremendous noise. However, the beast, blinded by bloodlust to consume the annoying human, paid no mind. Yuder dodged the sweeping tail overhead, ducking and retreating. Every time the monster's venom and body fluids grazed his bare skin, he felt as if he was occasionally touched by fire.

Launching himself upward with a leap, he landed a blow on Pethuamet's back. Hearing a shriek of pain, he instantly switched his position again. As he momentarily conjured a flame to illuminate his position, a furious claw swiped at it as if to crush and extinguish the light. However, Pethuamet could grasp nothing.

The monster's roar reverberated through the forest. Yuder got the impression that the cries were becoming louder and more inflated.

'I think there were people who bled from the nose or had ruptured eardrums just by hearing the roar when it got any bigger.'

He wondered if the weaker mages who were listening to these cries were alright.

Yuder, again, had to dodge the venom spat by Pethuamet, hurling his body into the air. In his stead, several trees which received the venom collapsed backward with a mournful sound, melting away.

Panting heavily, he looked up to see the tree leaves shimmering in golden light above the forest.

'There it is.'

Up until now, the lure had been working well. The passage of time felt as long as a day, which was a problem. But, he had not received a single injury and everything was going smoothly.

"Come on… follow me more…."

In response to Yuder's muttering, Pethuamet roared with anger. With a dull feeling in his head, he felt an itch inside his ear, then something trickled down. Seeing that the loud noise was now halved, it appeared that his eardrum could no longer withstand and had burst.

‘Maybe it’s better since I can’t hear that noisy roar.’

However, not hearing meant a disruption in the process of detecting and dodging the monster using all his senses. Yuder couldn’t dodge the tail of Pethuamet, which suddenly appeared from the side where he couldn’t hear, and was hit at the end.

‘Ah, damn it.’

His body flew, grazing several trees and plunging into the ground with the feeling of shattering. Yuder immediately rolled his body to avoid the attack of Pethuamet, which was falling directly overhead.

With a tremendous tremor, the massive body that could crush anyone whizzed past the side of his head.

‘Damn it!’

Feeling around, he found that the sword he was holding was gone. There was no time to find the sword in the dark, so Yuder, his mistake burning bitterly, immediately moved his body again.

“Hey! Are you okay?”

A familiar voice worried about him from not too far away. It seemed the Awakener who had agreed to assist him was nearby.

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Chapter 284

“Hey! Are you alright?”

A worried unfamiliar voice resonated not too far from him. It seemed that Awakener nearby had decided to help him out.

Yuder evaded the attacks relentlessly using the power of the wind and raised his voice.

“Do any of you have a sword?”

“What, a sword?”

“I dropped mine! It’d be nice if there was a spare one, but if not…”

His speech was cut off as a claw narrowly grazed his earlobe. He clamped his mouth shut and vaulted onto the branch of a large tree, causing the monster, Pethuamet, to roar savagely. The sound was venomous enough to make his unresponsive ear feel numb.

Yuder clung to the tree, gasping for breath, feeling his head spinning.

“Got it! You said a sword! I’ll find and throw one to you, just keep going!”

Fortunately, it seemed that his intended message had been properly conveyed, as the stranger responded affirmatively. Yuder did just as instructed and leaped from the giant branch. As he moved, Pethuamet bounded after him, clawing at the ground. The constant noise of the ground crumbling and the forest being destroyed by the rushing monster followed him. The smoke exuding

from the venom spilling from Pethuamet shrouded the forest in darkness, creating an apocalyptic spectacle.

Luring Pethuamet was undeniably one of the most challenging and strenuous tasks Yuder had undertaken since his return from the dead. To keep the monster's attention, he couldn't escape too quickly. But, the moment he tried to use his usual powers to protect himself, the beast would absorb his strength and grow even stronger, necessitating extreme caution.

Whenever Yuder felt the presence of mages or other Awakeners fending off monsters nearby, he used fire or water powers, risking danger to draw the slowing Pethuamet's attention. Despite his best efforts to not provide any opportunity for absorption, Pethuamet had grown larger than when the baiting first began.

Dodging the collapsing trees overhead, Yuder turned his gaze towards a faintly twinkling golden tree not too far off. Given that the golden light took longer to appear this time, he sensed that they were also in a difficult situation. That golden glow, and the ceaseless loud noises from around, were all evidence of the Western Mage Union mages risking their lives to guide him on the right path.

Wiping the mixture of sweat or blood, he couldn't tell which, trickling down his forehead and neck, Yuder poured strength into his legs. The adrenaline-driven pulsing sensation of his muscles and lungs threatening to explode had oddly quietened after surpassing a certain limit.

And finally, a bright red tree far off in the distance shone brilliantly, indicating its presence.

'Finally.'

The red color was the signal agreed upon to indicate when Yuder had reached the highest terrain. The Western Mage Union mages

had succeeded in guiding him through the darkness and countless obstacles to the very end!

The moment he realized this, the world's stillness vanished and the muted sounds and speed all returned to normal.

Rrrrrraaaaahhh-

As Pethuamet's roar rocked his field of vision, Yuder stumbled and turned his head. He found himself staring directly into the monster's enlarged eyes and pupils. Seeing Pethuamet bare its teeth and halt momentarily to spew venom, he seized the opportunity to fling a rock he had been clutching while fleeing.

The stone, propelled by a wind-laden arm, found its mark in one of the eyes of the Pethuamet. As black blood splattered in all directions, the beast shrieked in agony, lighting up the surroundings once more.

In order to properly lure the creature, it was essential that its eyesight remained unimpaired, hence the previous avoidance of such attacks. But now, the situation was different. They were nearing their destination, and it was necessary to land a more lethal blow to drain the creature's strength.

Vaulting with the wind, Yuder dashed past the final golden tree and towards the shimmering, red tree uphill. Numerous attacks targeted him in the meantime, more ferocious than before. He owed his untouched state to his instinct, reflexes, and the memory of the long-accumulated experience.

"Over here! This way!"

From not too far away, someone wearing a mage robe waved frantically and shouted.

“Head straight, and you’ll reach the end of the hill! And your comrades at the base said…”

As brave as the mage was to signal his position while gesturing, he could not finish his words. He stumbled and fell due to Pethuamet smashing the ground with its tail. Luckily, an unremarkable-looking young Awakener, dressed in worn-out clothes, appeared out of nowhere. He caught the mage by the armpit and whisked him up into a tree, preventing further harm.

It was uncertain whether proper cooperation took place, but considering the dire circumstances, it seemed they were able to help each other effectively, which was a relief.

“Everyone nearby, back away now!”

Yuder, running towards the visible end of the hill, shouted at the top of his lungs.

“The moment I reach the end, I’ll collapse this entire area!”

“Hold on! Your sword!”

The young Awakener who saved the mage shouted from high up in a tree.

“We found your sword, take it!”

Without hesitation, he threw the long sword he was holding. Yuder easily caught his sword, which was enveloped by the power of the wind. Despite repeatedly striking the monster, whose hide no ordinary weapon could penetrate, and being drenched in corrosive, venom-infused blood, the sharpness of his sword was undiminished. It truly was a top-tier sword made from Eucalractium.

As Yuder reflected on the fact that Kishiar was the one who gifted him this sword, he was momentarily overwhelmed by a strange

sensation, forgetting the pressing situation. Even though he knew Kishiar wasn't present, the moment he gripped the sword's handle, an odd sense of stability washed over him, as if Kishiar was backing him up. This strange yet familiar sensation seemed to drown out Pethuamet's murderous intent, his throbbing ears, and his pounding head.

However, this moment was fleeting, and Yuder was thrust back into reality. He leaped back to evade Pethuamet, who rushed forward with its mouth agape, ready to swallow him. As he vaulted on the wind and looked at the terrain, he spotted steep rocks lining the bottom of the tangled hillside.

'This should be enough.'

While the elevation was on the lower side, this just meant he had to dig deeper into the earth.

'The only concern left is whether my remaining power will hold…'

He had expended more energy than expected in getting this far. Even in his previous life, it had been challenging to muster enough power to alter the terrain more than once a day. It was ironic and regrettable that the excessive power surge, which had been uncomfortable since the day he seemed to absorb the chunk of power within Kishiar, chose to settle when he needed it the most.

'If that had been the case, just a little effort could have achieved what I want… Well, there is no helping it. I would have to make do with the strength I have.'

Yuder paused, stopping just before the end of the hill. The prey it had been chasing turned around, emitting an abnormal aura, which prompted the Pethuamet monster to halt its movements and adopt a defensive stance. Onlookers hidden nearby held their breaths as they watched a monster, grotesquely swollen in spots, and a much smaller human locked in a standoff, each aiming for the other's life. It

was time to see whether the man could, as he had assured, single-handedly defeat this nightmarish monster.

"…"

Amid the tension, Pethuamet made the first move. Just as the monster was swinging its massive, spike-studded tail as though to strike at any moment, the mages and Awakeners swallowed their screams at the sight of Yuder, who still did not dodge…

Rumble. The ground shook as though thunder roared from the storm clouds above.

"An earthquake……?"

A mage hiding nearby mumbled in a daze. Pethuamet also flinched to a halt. The monster, which had been about to attack, stopped and looked down at the trembling ground beneath its feet, confused.

"The air… no, the entire forest is…"

The young Awakener, who had tossed a sword to Yuder, uttered in a breathless voice, watching the shivering tree branches and leaves. Indeed, it wasn't just the earth that was shaking. As the trembling sound grew louder, it felt as though the trees, rocks, the air, and finally, even the sky beyond, were shaking.

And at that moment, when the tiny tremor quickly rose to its peak like a bouncing ball hitting the ground…

With a tremendous roar like the opening of the heavens and the earth, the entire hill collapsed.

"Aaargh!"

Everyone screamed as the sound of the shaking earth and the collapsing sky continued unabated. Dust, smoke, and the palpable waves of enormous power induced terror in everyone.

It was awe-inspiring.

The force of nature, which no one had ever imagined could be controlled by human power, was responding to someone's will.

For thousands, tens of thousands of years, the colossal force of nature, always stationary, had stirred to life. No one dared to think of escaping while nature's huge body was moving. They were completely dominated by sheer overwhelming force, fear, and awe.

After what seemed an eternity, the earthquake and dust finally began to subside. A mage, his face pale as if on the verge of passing out, barely managed to rise and shake the magic tool in his hand, emitting light that brightened their surroundings.

"My God……"

The scenery they had been looking at just moments ago was nowhere to be seen under the faint light.

The tall hill, which had been standing firm like a giant beast in a crouch, was more than half gone, leaving only a sharp cliff, as if it had been cut artificially. The endless pit that was dug out beneath was so huge it seemed more fitting to call it a valley.

Sporadically erupting like spears from underneath were rocks, and atop them was a glimpse of the monster's body, impaled by the fall. The monster, which until now had appeared so big and terrifying, lay collapsed like a helpless little beast, its long tongue hanging out, completely drained.

All eyes were on the man with black hair standing in front of it, holding a sword, and everyone fell silent. No one could express the

emotions they were feeling.

Yuder very slowly raised his sword, then brought his arm down toward the shining blue tongue. It was such a slow attack that even a child could have dodged, yet Pethuamet couldn't evade it. Its limp body twitched a few times, but that was all.

After a moment, the enormous tongue was cleanly severed by the sword, spraying a vast amount of body fluids. The man, covered from head to toe in the fluid, watched it until the blue light from the severed tongue flickered and finally stopped.

At last, when all the light had ceased and Pethuamet's torn pupil was relaxed, the sword in Yuder's hand also dropped lifelessly to the ground. Just as everyone was about to gasp, watching his body collapse in a stagger, a shadow flew in from afar in an instant, jumping down fearlessly to catch him.

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Chapter 285

His body felt unbearably heavy, as if he couldn’t lift a single finger. Despite the faint will that remained, his vision was dark and he could hear nothing, leaving him unsure whether he had fallen to the ground or was merely standing. These were typical symptoms that appeared when all the strength in his body was exhausted.

This was the first time he’d experienced such a phenomenon in this life, but he wasn’t surprised, as he had experienced it a few times in his previous life. Regardless of how powerful one may be, there is a limit to the amount of energy a single body can hold. In his previous life, he had increased the amount of energy he could store through constant training, but he had not been at it long this time around, leaving him inevitably at a much lower capacity.

Yuder closed his eyes and slowly continued his breathing. Suddenly, he remembered the first time he’d experienced a similar phenomenon. Was it when he’d caused a valley in the west to crumble, standing in front of swarming monsters, squirming like insects? Once the sensation in his body, which had been abruptly cut off like a thread, had returned, Kishiar was there in front of him.

He was looking down at Yuder, who was lying down, with a very complicated expression. Whether he was smiling or perhaps angry, facing that expression, Yuder managed to gasp out a single sentence.

“I’ve found all ten methods to remove the ashes.”

He fainted immediately afterward, so he didn’t hear Kishiar’s response, but the feelings from that moment came back very clearly.

The relief and joy that came with the sudden disappearance of all the anxiety he had been carrying.

And some sharp, intense emotion that was pressing hard enough to cause a numbing pain in his chest.

When he naturally recalled the memory of that unfamiliar emotion, which felt like it was both his and not his, Yuder suddenly felt a sense of doubt.

‘What was that?’

The relief and joy were certain, but what followed was strange.

Did I… Did I feel such an emotion at that time?

“…”

Yuder suddenly opened his eyes with a cold shiver. It felt like he’d been unconscious for a very long time, but it didn’t seem to have been that long, judging from the corpse of Pethuamet that he saw as soon as he opened his eyes. He tried to lift his arm in frustration with the dark, blurring view, but someone gently restrained him. Instead of the foul stench that had been stinging his nose, a familiar scent enveloped his body.

“…don’t …move.”

He couldn’t hear properly due to the deafening in his ears, but it was enough to fully wake him up, even just with a part of the sentence. Yuder blinked to see the face of the person supporting his body more clearly. After a few attempts, he finally saw someone’s face in his view.

Was it the first light that shone in the darkness?

Yuder lost his senses momentarily as he looked at Kishiar’s face, whom he was seeing after three days. The feeling of reality that he thought he had regained the moment he woke up seemed to be drifting away again.

“…Commander?”

He wasn’t sure if he could be heard, given that even his own voice didn’t sound clear, but a gentle squeeze from the hand that was holding his indicated an affirmative response.

“How did you…”

“That’s not important right now.”

A low voice descended from above his head. It was then that Yuder finally saw the wave-like emotion rippling in Kishiar’s red eyes. As he quickly averted his gaze due to the chill creeping up his back, he finally managed to take in the surrounding landscape.

They were inside the massive trap that Yuder had set to kill Pethuamet. He could vaguely see the faces of the people sticking their heads out from the cliff and shouting something. Small bundles of light were floating around them, indicating that everything seemed to have settled down.

Yuder cast another glance towards the body of Pethuamet, whom he had slain. He had been unable to let down his guard for fear of the unexpected, even after severing the monster’s tongue, but upon seeing the motionless form riddled with holes, he finally felt assured that he had truly killed it.

Pethuamet was dead. In this lifetime, Yuder Aile had truly succeeded in killing that nightmare of a monster.

Though his body was in a battered state, he had not suffered any injuries severe enough to result in dismemberment, and neither his Cavalry comrades nor any other people had been harmed. The only thing that was shattered was not the villages or cities in the western border, but the Great Sarain Forest.

And, in front of his eyes, Kishiar, too, was utterly unscathed this time. The moment he realized this, a refreshing feeling seeped in, as if he had resolved a long-held regret and ambition.

“…Are you smiling?”

Above his head, Kishiar mumbled in disbelief.

“Can you really afford to smile in such a state?”

Had he been smiling? As he could not see his own expression, he wasn’t certain whether he was truly smiling or not. However, the fact that he felt good was true, so he didn’t respond.

“You kept… your promise for sure.”

As he shifted the topic, Kishiar let out a deep sigh.

“Indeed.”

Unexpected things did happen, but… Along with his low voice, an emotional touch caressed Yuder’s body, and he was hugged close. He was smaller than Kishiar, but still he was a man, considerably tall compared to others. Seeing himself held so lightly, like a child, he strangely felt the reality of Kishiar’s return.

But while he did feel the reality, the emotion of not wanting to be held was another matter entirely.

“I can walk on my own…”

“Really? If you can lift your hand by yourself, I’ll let you go.”

“…”

Yuder tried to muster strength in his arm. However, only his fingertips twitched a bit; his body wouldn’t follow his will at all.

Kishiar, watching him, let out another deep sigh. It felt as if he was holding back from saying something he desperately wanted to say.

“Did you… leave everyone behind?”

Yuder decided to change the topic again. However, strangely, Kishiar’s expression only hardened further at his question, not softening at all.

“It seems like that’s not what we should be worrying about right now. Is there anywhere that hurts?”

“I… I’m not sure.”

“So, you’re saying it’s serious enough that you don’t even know where it hurts.”

With the curt reply, the fingers supporting his body tightened and then relaxed. Yuder suddenly remembered the distinct imprint of five fingers on the door of the Cavalry Commander’s room.

‘That must have been left by Kishiar.’

Despite possessing such immense strength, the arms of the man holding him only exuded a sense of firm security. It felt slightly strange to be unafraid while in the arms of another, unable to resist.

‘No, it’s not just being unafraid, it’s as if…’

“Why are you looking at me like that? Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m not.”

Yuder shook his head to shake off the strange feeling. But the moment he met the worried, red gaze looking at him, a part of his memories from before he woke up suddenly surfaced.

‘…Ah.’

A strange feeling had been tugging at his heart, a pain that was unbearable despite the refreshing and pleasant emotions he was feeling. He finally seemed to understand where this feeling was heading.

‘Was it Kishiar?’

The fact that he had once harbored such emotions for none other than Kishiar La Orr startled him. His mind was perplexed by the revelation, but his heart quivered with a marvelous sensation, as if it had rediscovered a long-lost piece.

During his moment of mild confusion, Kishiar, likely discerning his peculiar state, halted his steps with a frown creasing his forehead.

“It seems your condition is not well.”

“No, it’s not…”

Before he could even deny it, Kishiar reached out a hand, shielding his eyes. A white light poured from his palm, and then, it was truly as if he had blacked out.

–-

The surroundings were incredibly noisy. Unable to keep his eyes shut any longer, he gritted his teeth and forced them open. The clamor grew louder instantly, finally morphing into recognizable voices that resonated in his ears.

“Yuder. Are you conscious?”

“…Kanna?”

He turned his head, but despite hearing her voice, he couldn’t see his familiar comrade’s face. Something seemed to be

obstructing his view. Stunned, he tried to rub his eyes, but someone promptly grabbed his hand, stopping him.

“No, don’t touch your face. We’ve bandaged it.”

“Why…”

“You completely drenched yourself in the monster’s fluid. Why on earth would you do that?”

Kanna’s voice shook with mixed emotions.

“Do you realize you were injured the most, even though you weren’t alone?”

“…Is it severe?”

“You need to ask that?”

A slapping sensation came from the vicinity of his right shoulder. It seemed to come from anger but didn’t hurt in the slightest.

“Everything from your head to toe is a mess! Your eyes and ears are severely affected, you’ve broken ribs, and they said you were drained of all strength, and, and…!”

“That’s enough for me to hear.”

Interrupting her, he exhaled. Despite the news of his severe condition, he felt oddly untroubled.

“…Where’s the Commander?”

“The Commander is…”

Kanna seemed ready to respond, but instead, fell silent.

“You don’t need to know about that. Rest more.”

“Kanna?”

Her statement felt less like a simple delay and more like an ominous omen.

‘I killed Pethuamet, so why is the environment still so chaotic?’

Familiar sounds reached him from somewhere. Shouts. Groans. And… explosions.

‘…Explosions?’

With a blank expression, he moved his lips and found his voice.

“Hasn’t it ended?”

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“Hasn’t it ended?”

“No. Calm down, Yuder.”

Kanna strained to hold back Yuder, who was attempting to hastily move.

“How long was I unconscious? Where are we?”

“We’re at the Western Mage Union’s base. The Commander brought you here, and it hasn’t been long since Priest Lusan finished your treatment.”

That meant the battle with Pethuamet had ended just a few hours ago. A dreadful thought crossed his mind, wondering if Pethuamet, whom he thought he had killed, hadn’t actually died completely. Even if that wasn’t the case, there was still the possibility that the remaining monsters could cause problems.

‘What’s going on? What about Kishiar…’

The moment he bit his lip, Kanna responded as if reading his thoughts with a firm voice.

“Don’t worry, the reason isn’t what you think. The noise outside is because the mages and our side are arguing.”

“Arguing? Why?”

“Why indeed?”

Kanna sighed, stroking the back of Yuder’s hand.

“The Commander ordered that even when you wake, you must not go outside. So you mustn’t move from here until Priest Lusan comes back.”

Yuder fell silent for a moment before turning his head toward where Kanna was likely situated.

“Is he… angry?”

“Wouldn’t it be odd if he wasn’t?”

“I’m also angry, you know. I might not look like it, but I’m really mad.” Kanna mumbled, her voice barely audible as she stared at Yuder’s hand, her words hinting at concerns for what was to come.

“…Anyway, one thing’s for sure, I’ve never seen the Commander’s face like that when he brought you…”

Yuder couldn’t see Kanna’s blue eyes looking out into the distance. Clearing her thoughts, Kanna gazed at the thick bandages covering Yuder’s eyes, letting out a long sigh.

“…But Yuder, aren’t you curious about what we’ve been doing for the past three days? A lot of surprising things happened, don’t you want to hear?”

Despite knowing that her words were aimed to divert his attention, Yuder couldn’t help but respond.

“What happened?”

“Well, Prince Ejain… he awakened.”

All sounds from outside that were reaching his ears disappeared in his mind at that moment. Yuder felt the silence, clearly waiting for his reaction, and licked his lips in disbelief.

“Awakened?”

“Yes. The same awakening as us. What, not surprised?”

Of course, he was surprised. However, not because Ejain had awakened, but because of the timing of his awakening.

Prince Ejain should have awakened later, not now. How he awakened in his past life was not publicly known, but it was widely known that the lackluster succession dispute ended abruptly with Ejain’s awakening.

So, even if the timing of his awakening differed from his previous life, he had expected it to occur after he returned to Nelarn, not during his time with the Cavalry. His mind spun quickly.

“No, I’m also surprised. How did it happen?”

“It was when we arrived at the location where his followers were waiting. The number of people was far fewer than the prince originally stated, and it didn’t feel right. As expected, the traitors attacked the prince’s followers and were hiding there for a surprise attack.”

The traitors were quickly subdued by the Cavalry, but a few managed to escape into the woods. Prince Ejain decided to take upon himself the arduous task of questioning them personally, then ending their lives.

However, during a brief moment of vulnerability, one of the captured traitors charged at the prince, intending to kill him. It was a hair-raising moment of deadly danger, yet a miracle happened then. Prince Ejain had awakened.

“I was truly surprised. I’ve never seen such an ability. Do you know what it was?”

“No.”

Although he knew, Yuder merely shook his head in silence.

“A bright light burst forth. When I opened my eyes after shielding them, the man who was charging to attack was dead, and there was something around the prince, radiating a mysterious aura. At first, I thought it was just a mass of light, but when I looked closer… it was stone.”

Listening to Kanna’s astonished voice, Yuder gave a slight nod.

‘As I thought.’

Yuder felt a slight relief at the realization that Ejain’s ability, which he was familiar with, had manifested in the same way in this life as well.

In his previous life, Ejain was known as the Silver King followed by the Six Stars. That title was bestowed upon him because of the six masses of light that would circle around him, protecting their master. Very few knew the fact that inside the brilliantly radiant light were simply ordinary-looking stones.

Yuder wouldn’t have known this either if he hadn’t met Ejain personally. Perhaps because he thought it wasn’t very impressive, Ejain himself didn’t widely publicize this fact either.

Still, Ejain used those masses of light to exert a more powerful defensive power than anyone else. After his awakening, there was no one who could physically injure him. That was the very reason he was also known as the Guardian of the Barrier.

‘Perhaps the Ejain of the previous life awakened due to similar reasons.’

It felt quite ironic that the only weapon the Prince, who had been thrown into life-threatening danger countless times, managed to

acquire was a few ordinary stones. No matter how much they shone, in the end, they were just stones.

“Everyone was surprised. Even the prince himself was so startled, he didn’t know what to do. But we still had to catch the remaining traitors, so we went after them… It turned out there was no need for us to chase them. Some people had already taken care of them.”

Kanna’s voice fell low.

“As it turns out, they were Awakeners staying at the Star of Nagran outpost in the Great Sarain Forest.”

Yuder jerked his head up. The mention of the Star of Nagran, which he had momentarily forgotten in his dazed state since woken up, brought back his memories.

“If you mention Star of Nagran, I think… I’ve seen it too.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard. The people you met were from Star of Nagran, and so were the ones we met. Thanks to them, we were able to return without being too late.”

“What do you mean? …Did we do more than just encounter Star of Nagran?”

“Don’t be surprised. We’ve been to the village where those people live. So, to be precise, we visited one of the outposts of Star of Nagran that I mentioned before.”

“What?”

They had been to an outpost created by Star of Nagran? How did that happen? The more he heard, the more questions he had. When he tilted his head in confusion, Kanna let out a pleased snort, as if she had gotten the reaction she wanted.

“I told you it would be surprising. Who could have expected the subordinates of that person, who almost got killed by the traitors while on the mission to escort the prince from the Great Sarain Forest, were rescued and staying with those people?”

Kanna continued the tale, jesting now but expressing how she had genuinely broken out in a cold sweat back then.

The Cavalry members stood in stunned silence as they surveyed the bodies scattered before them. The man who had just used his bare hands to impale and kill the last traitor, now discarded the corpse and furrowed his brow at them. Despite being dressed like an ordinary huntsman, he couldn’t hide his grotesquely hardened fingers, which seemed as solid as iron. Kanna suspected that he was undoubtedly an Awakener.

“What’s this? More of them? Are you with those scum too?”

“On the contrary. We were chasing them.”

“Oh… I see? Our folks said those guys are terribly bad news. Hmm. I don’t know who to believe.”

The man gestured dismissively toward his companions standing behind him. Every single one of them appeared to be severely injured and gazed warily at the Cavalry members.

‘Those injured don’t seem to be Awakeners… What kind of group are they?’

In the midst of her confusion, the tension spiked sharply. A moment later, Prince Ejain, who had appeared with a pale face, opened his eyes wide and his mouth hung agape.

“…You are?”

“Wait, the Prince?”

The injured all exclaimed in unison.

“So, the person you’ve been waiting for has finally arrived?”

The Awakener casually shrugged, cupping his ear as if straining to hear their response. They didn’t head towards the pile of bodies in the lodge, but instead towards a village the man guided them to, where a few more of Ejain’s surviving subordinates were still lingering.

“Well… Normally they would fuss about it, but since the guests we worked hard to save were waiting for this person, and since you’re all Awakeners, I guess they’ll let it slide this time. But, everything you’ve seen here must remain a secret.”

Initially, they didn’t believe it, but indeed there was a village where the man led them. The man guiding them revealed a knowing smile, as if understanding their shock at discovering a perfectly ordinary village hidden deep within the dense and gloomy Great Sarain Forest.

“No one knows we live here. It was quite an effort to hide it with our abilities. Things are getting a little dicey as the number of people increases, but… unless those distant mages get involved, a little exposure is not a big deal in my opinion. As long as the village isn’t revealed, anyone we come across just assumes we’re nomads and moves on.”

The man speculated that the Cavalry members were followers of Ejain. Ejain, meeting his subordinates whom he never thought he would see again, blushed at the corners of his eyes a few times during their conversation.

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Ejain generously gave away several gold buttons pinned inside his clothing to the hunter-garbed Awakener, who had offered assistance to his subordinates without asking for anything in return. He expressed sincere gratitude, but the man refused to accept such tokens, saying that he merely lent a hand out of sympathy for their story of near-death betrayal by their former comrades. However, upon Ejain's repeated insistence, the man reluctantly accepted the buttons, his face etched with discomfort.

"Ah, goodness. You insist so much… Aren't these items more necessary for distinguished folks like you, who have a long journey ahead? Anyhow, feel free to continue your discussions. I'll be outside."

Despite his grotesquely twisted finger-like appendages and scar-ridden face, the Awakener was genuinely simple and compassionate. After he left the room, Ejain could finally comfortably recount to his subordinates the ordeals he had gone through. His men were shocked at the tale of treachery they heard, and were even more astonished upon learning of his Awakening, unable to hide their surprise as they shared in laughter and tears.

As they conversed, Kanna, who hid her face within the hood of her cloak, secretly used her abilities, under the direction of Kishiar. From various corners of their dwelling, the genuine worries of Ejain's subordinates that had filled their minds, undoubtedly formed data and flowed into her head. Only then was she able to feel somewhat relieved.

"I'm not sure how those who despise Awakeners will feel once they learn that I've Awakened. If you feel it is difficult to serve me

because of this, there’s no need for you to return to our homeland with me.”

“But Your Highness, our views on the Awakeners have completely changed since we arrived here. We didn’t understand when you suggested adopting a policy similar to the Orr Empire to accept the Awakeners. But now we do.”

Ejain had long advocated for Nelarn to adopt a policy akin to the Orr Empire to include Awakeners in their ranks, but his proposition had never been accepted until now. However, he had now become an Awakener, and his close aides had also experienced the power of the Awakeners. If they could safely return home, much would likely change.

As she observed this, Kanna pondered on the Awakeners who were still ostracized and not acknowledged by society. Although she was lucky to have Awakened an ability that went unnoticed unless she revealed it herself, which even allowed her to join the Cavalry, there were far more who were not so fortunate.

Take this village, for example. Through the information she gleaned on the way, Kanna was astounded to realize that this village was an outpost of the Star of Nagran. Although she had assumed it would be a dangerous place as it was one of the organization’s bases, the actual first impression of the outpost was nothing more than an ordinary village surrounded by a dense forest.

Kishiar, who had secretly received a report on the true nature of the village from Kanna, fell into deep thought. He concluded that they should slip away as inconspicuously as possible once Ejain’s business was settled.

However, things didn’t proceed as smoothly as anticipated. Just as they were wrapping up their conversation, an unusual sound came from outside. Startled by the noise of several people rushing

by and distant shouts, Kanna peeked outside, only to be stopped by the stern-faced host.

“It’s probably nothing. But you folks shouldn’t show your faces. I’ll go check it out.”

“What’s happening?”

Ejain, who was also alarmed by the noise from outside during their conversation, displayed his anxiety. His subordinates responded to him.

“Perhaps a monster had appeared on the outskirts of the village, or more likely, they had brought ordinary folk like us that they’d found in the Great Sarain Forest.”

“Does that happen often?”

“During the few days we stayed in this village, monsters continued to appear, causing quite a commotion. But they say no one was killed or seriously injured. Remarkable people, really.”

“So… they often save people like you and bring them to the village?”

“More often than you might think. There are quite a few who escaped from being captives in foreign countries or from the burgeoning slave trade. Many of the Awakeners in the village have a strong sense of justice, so they couldn’t just stand by when they saw people in such conditions. However…”

One of Ejain’s subordinates hesitated for a moment before continuing with a gloomy face.

“Not all are virtuous, of course. As the village, a sanctuary carefully hidden away, becomes more crowded with ordinary people, conflicts among them appear to be on the rise. We’ve seen the

Awakeners who saved our lives argue fiercely with other Awakeners in the village.”

Even setting aside the fact that this place was a base for the Star of Nagran, it was inevitable that internal strife would break out in a village established for the Awakeners who had been persecuted to live in peace. Kanna’s gaze shifted directly to Kishiar and his companions, feeling the complexity of their thoughts passing over their faces.

“This is no ordinary situation.”

Before long, the host returned with a serious look on his face and addressed Ejain’s subordinates.

“I went to check out reports of a monster, but it turns out that armed men had gathered in large numbers searching for some guy who was picked up by our villagers this morning, like you.”

Why on earth were there so many reckless people venturing into the Great Sarain Forest at such a dangerous time? He cursed and then sighed deeply before continuing.

“They’re still prowling around the village, but their leader seems to be quite formidable. I’m not sure how this will turn out. The leader looks like he’s from the Southern countries… I wonder what brought a Southerner this far north…”

For a moment, Kanna thought of Nathan Zuckerman, Kishiar’s adjutant, who had the distinctive red skin of a Southerner. It seemed she wasn’t the only one who had this thought as Kishiar, who had been silently observing the situation until now, finally stepped forward.

“A person found near here this morning… Who is he?”

“We’re not sure. All we know is that he was injured, fleeing through the dangerous forest, and we felt sorry for him.”

The man they had rescued had regained consciousness not long ago. As soon as he woke up, he offered to give them as many precious gems as they wanted if they would hide him here for a while. By his clothing and appearance, he was clearly not from the Empire. Unlike the refugees or slaves who had fled here, he was wearing expensive clothes and wouldn’t say anything about himself. Until new intruders showed up, there had been a heated debate in the village over this mysterious man.

“We were able to decide quickly to treat you and send you on your way because you told us your situation immediately. But with him… we have to be cautious. And now this…”

“Didn’t he give his name? What does he look like?”

“Hmm… Benn, or maybe Jenn. I think that’s what he said his name was when he woke up. As for his looks… all I remember is that he had brown hair. But why do you keep asking?”

At those words, a rumbling noise came from Ejain and his subordinates. Prince Ejain, with his stern face, rose and addressed Kishiar.

“…It seems we are too late. No, we are certainly too late.”

“Coincidentally, I was thinking the same. Then, it would be clear who the trackers outside the village are.”

Things started to take a turn, contrary to the intentions of the host who had been trying to conceal them from prying eyes and send them off. Originally, they were supposed to arrive at the mountain hut with Prince Ejain, and wait for the Peletta Knights, who would follow a bit later with the traitors.

However, due to the unexpected presence of the traitors who betrayed Ejain's men and the outpost of the Star of Nagran near the hut, everything was drastically altered. They ended up confronting other Awakeners from the outpost, who had quickly gathered from the center of the village.

"Who are you? Who the hell are you to know the ones who came out there, the one picked up at dawn, and the ones who had been laid down and treated for days? What do you know about us? Could you be the ones sent by the Lord of Tainu?"

Looking at the Awakeners with their faces filled with suspicion, Kanna broke out in a cold sweat.

'What should I do….'

Even if she denied it, they didn't seem likely to believe her. The look of fear in their eyes, suspecting that they were sent by the lord of the western metropolis to kill them, was gradually turning into anger. Even if a fight broke out, they didn't think they were outmatched, but they were at a disadvantage due to the number of injured on their side.

Despite sensing Kanna's anxious gaze, Kishiar confidently stepped forward in front of the others…

"So, what happened then?"

Yuder, seizing the momentary pause in Kanna's story, asked anxiously. A faint chuckle came from the invisible darkness beyond.

"What do you think you would have done?"

"If it were me…"

If Yuder Aile had been there and in the same situation as Kishiar, he would have first subdued the ominous Star of Nagran Awakeners

all at once, cooled down a bit, and then proposed to talk.

"…I would have created a situation for conversation and then started talking."

As Kanna gave her short response while collecting thoughts she shouldn't know, she burst out into a louder laugh.

"That's exactly what the Commander did."

"Huh?"

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Chapter 288

“That’s exactly what the Commander did.”

“Huh?”

“The Commander also did it that way.”

Kanna, repeating herself once more, soon explained what Kishiar had done.

“As soon as someone as tall as Kishiar stepped forward, they became incredibly tense. Even the Second Prince of Nelarn seemed worried about a potential conflict, and he attempted to take off the cloak he used to hide his face, to explain himself. It was then that someone misunderstood the movement and attacked by mistake…”

“Who?”

Upon hearing the question from Yuder, calm in tone but certainly not in intent, Kanna blinked.

“Ah… It was someone who can control sand. They were clumsy in controlling their powers and were abandoned by their family. But don’t worry. Neither of them were hurt.”

Only after hearing this, did his momentarily chilled brain return to its normal state.

“That’s fortunate.”

According to Kanna, Kishiar blocked the attack aimed at him and Ejain in a blink of an eye. As the fine but sharp sand particles lost their momentum and spilled onto the ground, everyone in the village felt a crushing sense of pressure. Even a child crying in the distance

instantly ceased their wailing, such was the impressive force. Even Kanna, who had been observing Kishiar for a long time within their group, couldn't fully comprehend what he had done.

With eyes meeting the frozen gazes of those who had collapsed from the pressure, he gave Ejain a slow nod. The Prince, having received the signal to withdraw, hesitated before slowly backing away. Then, a low voice emerged from within Kishiar's cloak.

"I apologize for employing such crude methods, but we're running out of time to uphold our promise. Will you all stay seated and listen to what I have to say?…"

His language was far too elegant for the situation. Ordinary people couldn't fully comprehend the immense power he had unleashed, but the Awakeners were different. They instinctively understood that this overwhelming force was just a small part of what Kishiar possessed, and that no one here could defeat him.

Will you listen to me? While it seemed like in the form of a request, it was nothing short of a soft command.

In the silence that made it seem like the entire village had disappeared, Kishiar briefly explained that they had no connection to the Lord of Tainu.

"We are aiding the Western Mage Union, and the Knights stationed outside the village are our comrades. Our relationship with the distinguished foreign guests here was formed by chance. We are merely helping them return home safely after crossing the treacherous Great Sarain Forest. Some traitors showed up and complicated things, but we'd appreciate it if you knew that we are the ones who want to leave this place as soon as possible."

The Awakeners in the village had silently understood that the subordinates of Prince Ejain and the injured who arrived at dawn were not from the Empire. Everyone knew about the complex border

situation with foreign lands in the Great Sarain Forest, and the name of the Western Mage Union had a potent effect.

Although the mages of the Western Mage Union didn't know about the village, the Awakeners, who had been evading them and establishing their base, knew better than anyone about the poor relationship between the mages and the Lord of Tainu. They had been the hidden neighbors who had been observing up close how much trouble the mages had to endure to handle the monsters appearing in the Great Sarain Forest, in place of the Lord of Tainu.

As the year unfolded, rumors had spread that the mages, unable to hold back any longer, had finally erupted in a grand fight against the lord of Tainu. If someone had called upon others with powers to aid them from another place, the logical conclusion was clear.

"So, you were… mercenaries."

No one responded to the words spat out by someone. The Awakeners believed this silence to be an affirmation. The atmosphere rapidly deflated as they surmised that Kishiar and the Cavalry were mercenary Awakeners, hired by the Western Mage Union and noblemen from other countries.

Watching the scene, Kanna breathed a deep sigh of relief inwardly.

'Impressive…'

The few words Kishiar uttered seemed quite simple, but they were in fact brimming with insight into the hidden thoughts of the Awakeners living in this village. They didn't dislike the mages of the Western Mage Union, who were their enemy's enemy, and sympathized with other Awakeners who possessed the same powers. They regained their calm swiftly, realizing that they, who had lived ordinary lives until they awakened, had no affiliation with the group they were currently with.

“So… you’re saying you’ll leave the village as soon as we hand over the wounded who came in this morning?”

“That’s correct.”

“You should have said so from the start.”

Kishiar provided proof of his claim right there in front of the Awakeners. The group roaming around with menacing swords near the village turned out to be the Peletta Knights. Worried about encountering assassins, the Knights had quickened their pace into the Great Sarain Forest, lost Jenn in a battle against a peculiar monster, and were in pursuit.

Nathan Zuckerman and the Peletta Knights, who unexpectedly ran into their lord in an unexpected place, were surprised, but quickly reassured the village’s Awakeners, matching Kishiar’s pace and playing along with his words. Information exchanged rapidly among them while the Awakeners left the space, having agreed to hand Jenn back over to Kishiar.

“Oh, Nathan. I didn’t expect you to be caught off guard enough to lose that traitor.”

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but we were slowed down by constant monster attacks as soon as we entered the Great Sarain Forest. The traitor managed to escape in the confusion of the battle, and one of our company got injured trying to stop him.”

Even for a Swordmaster like Nathan Zuckerman, it wasn’t easy to deal with peculiar monsters while rescuing many people. The worry that Kishiar’s group might get hurt by assassins chasing Ejain also contributed significantly to the Knights’ anxiety.

As Nathan Zuckerman sighed in relief after seeing his unharmed lord, Ejain and his subordinates came across another subordinate, Melbon, who was injured while trying to stop the fleeing Jenn. Upon

meeting his lord after the discovery that he was a spy sent from Nelarn's greatest enemy, Durban, Melbon remained silent for a while.

"Melbon… why did you stop Jenn instead of running away with him?"

"Didn't the Prince say he would decide Jenn's fate once he returned to Nelarn? Although I am a criminal, I didn't want him to witness Jenn, who has no shame, attempting to defy his final command. I failed, but still…"

Kanna was one of the few who read the sincerity in Melbon's confession of his loyalty to Prince Ejain. The prince looked at his former subordinate, lying severely wounded, with a complex expression and sighed. Melbon, guessing the meaning behind that sigh, lowered his head in a barely audible voice.

"I heard… you've awakened. You've gained power, so now no one can harm you, Your Highness. Forget about me. And… congratulations."

"Indeed. You too… try not to die before we reach Nelarn."

Melbon's eyes widened at those words. The underlings of Ejain, who had been wearing gloomy expressions behind him, also displayed similar surprised expressions. In the short span of time, Kanna could sense a significant change in Prince Ejain's heart. It wasn't information she could discern through her powers.

Then, the Awakeners brought in the injured man who had been lying down. There were clear signs of a struggle, as if he had anticipated a bleak future. As expected, it was Jenn who had fled, and Prince Ejain showed no more merciful reluctance to the man who had betrayed him twice.

“Now, it’s just a matter of us and them each going our separate ways.”

“Yes. If we want to return before tomorrow passes, we’ll have to be quite busy.”

When Kanna, feeling a bit complicated but light-hearted, spoke to Kishiar, he gave a matter-of-fact response.

“But why before tomorrow? It seems like it would be very difficult to return to the Western Mage Union’s base by then.”

Suddenly curious, Kanna asked only to meet the piercing red gaze beneath the brim of his cloak. She wondered if she had asked a question she shouldn’t have. Fortunately, the returned voice did not seem to show any displeasure at her question.

“I promised I would return by then.”

“A promise… Ah, you mentioned that earlier. But with whom?”

Kishiar did not respond as swiftly as before to that question. A breeze blew through, causing the cloth that covered his face to flutter. His lips beneath his revealed nose seemed to form a slightly different smile than before, but as soon as she opened her eyes, the sight vanished like a mirage.

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Chapter 289

What was the meaning behind that fleeting expression worn by Kishiar, who had always seemed so calm and composed? The image of his face was somehow indelibly etched in Kanna's mind, causing her to quietly withdraw.

Afterward, matters swiftly concluded. As his subordinates were preparing to leave, Prince Ejain exchanged a brief farewell with Kishiar near the village entrance.

He had planned to return home as soon as he left the village formed by the Star of Nagran, but instead he decided to stay a little longer at the hut, his original destination, for his still wounded subordinates. A strange emotion fluttered across the face of the young prince as he disclosed this plan.

"Are you sure about staying here longer, given the dangers of this place?"

"The route home from here passes through a third country, so the risks are minimal. Furthermore, I am… well, it still feels unreal, but I've become an Awakener, haven't I?"

As Prince Ejain spoke, he gazed at the shining stones circling around him with an unfamiliar look.

"These things are my protection, it seems… it puts my mind at ease. I don't feel as anxious as before. I think protecting those who chose to stay with me is more important now than rushing home, even if it means accepting some sacrifices."

"I feel ashamed. I was going to whip others into leaving immediately."

“No. Our positions are different, aren’t they? If I were in your shoes, I would have done the same.”

Kishiar’s jest did not draw laughter. Instead, Prince Ejain replied with solemnity, his gaze becoming resolute.

“Regardless, it will take a bit longer to return home than expected, but rest assured, I’ll fulfill our promise as soon as I get back. I’ve made arrangements to ensure the first matter can be handled, even if something happens to me.”

“The fulfillment of the promise isn’t urgent, take your time. I was worried because many are startled by sudden awakenings, but I’m glad to see you’ve regained your composure.”

“That’s probably due to your assistant, my new friend, sharing his words with me.”

The atmosphere surrounding Kishiar subtly shifted at that moment. After a pause, a faint voice emerged from beneath the brim of a concealing cloak.

“Is that so?”

“He once asked me if I thought I’d be followed by more people once I suddenly acquired a great power and shook off all the trouble around me. It was a shocking question for me. Embarrassingly, I had never doubted that part before.”

At first, the meaning of that enigmatic phrase eluded him. But in a situation where he had nothing to do other than suppress his presence and move around, he had no choice but to persistently ponder that distressing thought to escape his mental agony.

Then, Ejain had an epiphany. Had he ever thought about himself from such diverse angles before? He had pondered countless times about the future of Nelarn, the crises that were immediately in front

of him, the talents he couldn’t obtain, and the powers he wanted but couldn’t get. However, he had never purely gazed into his own inner self before. That moment felt as if his eyes were being opened.

“In retrospect, he might have wanted to tell me that the crucial factor in changing my surroundings was not power, but myself. That was the first thought that came to me when I awakened. It was as if he knew this would happen and told me in advance… His insight was truly astonishing.”

Kanna, who had been listening to their conversation not far away, was deeply startled by those words. She had seen Yuder speaking with Prince Ejain on several occasions, but she never imagined they had exchanged such words. Moreover, friends? Honestly, she found it harder to believe that Yuder Aile was a friend of Prince Ejain than that the Prince had become friends with a Cavalry member.

Despite her bewilderment, the conversation between the two continued.

“Through this imperial visit, I have received immense help from His Majesty the Emperor of Orr Empire, the Commander, and a new friend. The people of Nelarn will never forget this favor. The next time we get in touch, I will repay you with good news so you do not regret our alliance.”

Prince Ejain said his farewells with a gentler expression than when they first met, and turned around. His subordinates and the attendant Melbon, who had been waiting at a distance, formally greeted him. They bowed with sincere thanks toward the Cavalry members, then turned away. The Cavalry members watched their departure with mixed emotions. It was the moment when the first mission that had brought them all the way here was finally accomplished.

“Afterwards, we parted with the Peletta Knights and returned here. Everyone was in good spirits up until that point.”

Despite the incessant marching with little rest, not one of them expressed discontent. It was because their commander had led from the front. It didn't take long for all the members to notice that, unlike when they arrived with Kishiar, they were in quite a hurry this time.

Kanna, who noticed that his gaze often lingered to the east where their destination lay, secretly smiled. The Commander who never lost his composure and smile was in a hurry because he was worried about those around him, no doubt about it.

'When we return, I should ask Yuder if he really became friends with the Second Prince of Nelarn. Ah, and I should also tell him about the awakening. That would surprise Yuder, wouldn't it?'

She realized something was wrong when they were nearing the base where the Western Mage Union stayed.

"…Commander. This is the fifth one."

Gakane murmured, glancing around. In front of him lay the corpse of a monster torn apart by a shadow clone. The monster, an unidentified purple creature, was small in size, but its thorny tail was exceptionally long and large.

"It feels odd to see such weak monsters appearing this frequently. I apologize if I'm over-worrying…"

"No. It's not over-worrying, it's accurate judgment."

Kishiar responded, looking down at the ground soaked with black bodily fluid.

"I have a bad feeling about this. Can everyone pick up the pace a bit?"

"Yes."

The Cavalry members quickened their tired steps. Just before they entered the base, they encountered mages struggling to handle monsters identical to the ones they had defeated on their way.

When the Eldore siblings smashed the monster with a giant arm they had modified, the mages slumped to the ground with exhausted faces. They had no energy even to utter words of thanks.

“What’s the situation? Have there been abnormal monster appearances again?”

“No, it’s not that. Something worse… A calamity-like creature has appeared.”

Watching the mages with terror in their eyes, as if recalling something, the Cavalry members exchanged glances. The icy feeling that brushed down their spines marked the moment Kishiar strode forward and entered the depths of the base.

“My goodness! You’ve all returned safely…”

The moment they entered the last remaining building, the bloodstained Lusan rushed out to greet them. However, the other person they had expected to be at his side was nowhere to be seen.

“Priest Lusan. Where is Yuder Aile?”

Having briefly surveyed the surroundings, Kishiar asked in a cold tone. Priest Lusan shook his head regretfully.

“He… He went out to handle the monster.”

“A monster?”

“A strange monster we’ve never seen before has appeared. It’s said to grow larger and stronger each time it’s attacked…”

Lusan tried his best to briefly explain everything he had seen and heard so far. Despite stumbling over his words due to his lack of eloquence, Kishiar did not rush him and listened patiently until the end.

“So, Yuder went out to defeat the monster and other mages followed. I’ve been staying here, protecting this place and treating those who’ve been injured…”

The anxiety in Lusan’s trembling eyes deepened the unease the Cavalry members were feeling.

“If only you’d come a little earlier, you could have gone with them…”

At that moment, Kanna felt a shiver down her spine. Looking around, it seemed she was not the only one to feel that way; all her comrades wore shocked expressions as well. At the end of that chilling sensation was their Commander.

A moment later, an emotionless voice flowed out from beneath the hood of his black cloak.

“All Cavalry members, stand by here and keep an eye on the surroundings.”

“…”

“Determine what the mages upstairs are doing and what situations have arisen based on the story we’ve just heard. Kanna Wand will be responsible for gathering information.”

“…A-ah, understood.”

Though she tried not to stammer, she felt an icy tingle that froze her lips and overwhelmed her. As Kanna gritted her teeth, Kishiar’s gaze shifted upstairs.

“And.”

He gave his final command to Lusan.

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Chapter 290

“…Reserve your strength, Priest Lusan, for the one I will bring soon.”

And then, he disappeared as quickly as a blink. The Cavalry members only managed to collect themselves and breathe properly after he was gone.

“Wh-where did the Commander go? Don’t tell me he went to find Yuder alone?”

“Probably. He did say to Priest Lusan to conserve energy for the one he would bring…”

In response to Emun’s question, Gakane mumbled. Even the usually amiable Gakane struggled to maintain composure in this situation, his expression stiff.

“Kanna, are we really not going after him?”

“A monster that grows stronger the more it’s attacked, what is that all about? No matter how powerful Yuder is, how could he defeat it alone?”

“I don’t know…”

Kanna answered blankly towards the Eldore siblings huddled next to her.

“But we should do what he asked and wait for now.”

Yuder was undeniably the strongest member amongst the 330 Cavalry members. Everyone here had received help for their ability

development from Yuder. Kanna trusted Yuder's strength as much as, or even more than, she trusted Kishiar.

But strangely, she couldn't shake off the unsettling feeling.

And that unease became a reality a moment later with a massive earthquake that seemed to tear apart the Great Sarain Forest.

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"That earthquake… I truly thought the world was ending. I still can't believe that you caused it alone. When the Commander brought you back…"

After the entire story, Yuder felt the trembling of Kanna's small hand holding his own.

"We thought you were dead."

"…Kanna."

"Listen, don't ever do that again."

With a voice choking back emotion, Kanna pleaded.

"Promise me here. You won't do it again. No matter how dangerous it seems for others, you won't step in alone."

If it was anyone else asking, he might've agreed just to reassure them. But Kanna had the ability to discern lies and truths hidden within words if she wished.

'So that's why she kept holding my hand.'

Kanna tightened her grip on his hand as Yuder remained silent.

"…Won't you promise?"

“I’ll try.”

“…That’s the best you can do, huh.”

‘I see.’ Kanna gave a short reply and, letting out a sigh, she released his hand.

“But remember this. You only have one life. No matter how strong you are, death means the end. Have you ever considered those around you?”

Without realizing it, Yuder found himself smiling faintly. Indeed, her words were true. No matter how strong you are, death is the end. No amount of achievement, wealth, or power can accompany you in death.

And no one knew this better than himself.

“I know.”

“No, what do you know? You don’t know anything.”

As if all her previous cheerfulness was a lie, Kanna retorted coldly and hit Yuder’s shoulder once more.

“I’m furious that I only realized now that you’re such a fool. If I knew, I would have vehemently opposed when the Commander said he was leaving you behind.”

Yuder had wished for that too. But he stayed quiet, fearing that saying so would only make Kanna more upset.

“…I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. What are you apologizing for when you can’t even promise to stay out of trouble?”

After saying so, Kanna fell silent, unable to overcome her sense of distress. A few moments later, Yuder heard a rustling noise from her at his side.

“What does this look like?”

“…A sword?”

“Right. Your sword. When the Commander brought you here, he didn’t manage to bring it along, so someone else brought it later. But… touch this part here.”

Kanna guided Yuder’s hand to touch a certain spot. His numb fingers caught a rough, lengthy string. But as soon as he touched it, it crumbled and broke off piece by piece.

“Do you remember the red string that was originally attached to your sword? Luckily the sword is intact, but that string and the sheath are completely ruined. What you just touched was the last remaining piece of the string.”

Yuder silently focused on the coarse sensation at his fingertips. This string was a gift from Enon, who had forced it on him, saying it would help steady his energy. He had kept it tied to his sword ever since.

It wouldn’t matter if he made a new sheath, but despite its worn-out appearance, the string had never been damaged by fire or water before, so he couldn’t easily guess what it meant for it to have broken in this way.

“You were in a very dangerous fight for your sword to end up like this. Do you understand?”

“…”

Listening to Kanna's sharp voice, he touched the spot where the string had been tied for a long while.

"Sir Yuder. It seems you have woken up."

"Priest."

Not long after, Priest Lusan entered the room. Yuder had never been so grateful for his presence. If Lusan had arrived even a little later, Kanna would have seemed ready to confine him to the room forever.

"Let's see… Are you in pain?"

"No."

"How are your senses?"

As Lusan asked, he gently touched various parts of Yuder's face and arms. After a moment's thought, Yuder shook his head.

"I can feel your touch, but there's no pain."

"…"

Yuder thought Lusan would be relieved to hear he was not in pain, but for some reason, he was silent. Sensing his dark mood, Yuder cautiously asked.

"Is there something wrong with my condition?"

"It's quite peculiar. After all the divine power I poured into you, there's no heat."

Lusan muttered heavily.

"You would know that the monster was venomous. You drenched your entire body with its blood, so you can imagine what kind of state

you'd be in, right?"

"It must not have been a pretty sight."

He hadn't given it much thought when he was covered in blood, but thinking about it now, he started to worry more about Kishiar, who had immediately picked him up after seeing him in that state.

"Yes. But that's not the problem. When I use divine power, it seems to heat up momentarily, but then it quickly returns to normal and the stained area expands. So now I've applied some herbs and wrapped you in bandages."

Lusan sighed worriedly.

"The reason you're hardly feeling anything now is probably due to the venom covering your skin and the pain reliever herbs. I don't know which one is having a stronger effect… but if it's due to the pain reliever, your senses will gradually return as time goes by, and you'll start to feel pain. I'm sorry I couldn't do more due to my lack of skill…"

"That's not true."

Yuder responded quickly. Being weak to monsters was an inherent flaw and a natural limit he had. Wounds inflicted by monsters in his previous life had often taken longer to heal than other injuries, and it was likely the same this time. But the young Priest wasn't about to hold back his self-deprecating sigh. After mumbling gloomily for some time, Lusan, with weak movements, touched near Yuder's eyes and opened his mouth.

"Ah, as for your power, I'm not sure either, but the Commander instructed me to check that too once you wake up, so I will. Yuder, can you exert your strength now?"

‘Strength, eh?’ Yuder slowly flipped his palm and placed it in front of his chest, making a slight effort. He intended to summon an amount of water the size of a pea onto his palm, but as time passed, he didn’t feel anything.

“Did it work?”

“Did you intentionally create just one drop?”

Kanna, who was beside him, questioned.

“I tried to create an amount the size of a pea in my hand.”

“If it wasn’t intentional, it seems you haven’t recovered in that aspect yet.”

Lusan pronounced his judgment in a grave voice. Yuder was struck by a considerable shock. It would have been better if his strength had been excessively appeared like before. The opposite had never even crossed his mind.

“…”

“Do you finally get that you can’t act recklessly now? …But don’t worry too much, Yuder. You’ll be able to recover. The Commander, and we, will find a way.”

“I am…”

Yuder opened his mouth with a hard-to-express feeling, then closed it again. As Kanna was patting the back of his hand, the sound of fighting from outside was heard again. Just as Yuder turned his head, paying attention to the noise, Lusan suddenly raised his voice.

“Yuder. It’s fortunate you woke up early, but you must know that sleep is the best rest. Now that we’ve checked your condition, take

this and get some more rest.”

“I’m okay… But what about outside…”

“Yuder, drink this.”

Kanna joined in and poured something into his mouth. Yuder didn’t even have a chance to say anything before his consciousness started to blur again.

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Chapter 291

With a resounding click, Yuder’s foggy mind suddenly awakened.

‘Falling asleep while playing a game, it must have been incredibly boring.’

Yuder stared blankly at Kishiar, who was watching him through narrowed eyes. The sound that had just echoed in his ears was the noise of the man in front of him placing a game piece on the board. He frowned, his gaze scanning the scattered pieces on the black board. At a glance, it was clear his position was hopelessly cornered. The thought of simply surrendering the game and going to sleep was becoming increasingly attractive.

‘Is it not natural for me to lose focus? Wasn’t it the Commander who suddenly appeared through my bedroom window at dawn and pulled out a game board?’

‘The Commander, you say.’

‘Ah, yes. You’re the Duke now, aren’t you?’

Kishiar chuckled softly at Yuder’s retort, laced subtly with annoyance.

‘It seems the title doesn’t stick no matter how many times I say it.’

‘Well, I can’t help it. I’m a commoner with no need for formal titles.’

Despite Yuder’s cold sarcasm, Kishiar did not show anger. In that regard, he was a remarkably generous man.

‘Are you tired?’

‘Is that even a question?’

Yuder had just returned to the Commander’s quarters in the Cavalry after spending a few days at the imperial palace, summoned by Emperor Katchian. He was hardly pleased to encounter an uninvited guest at a time when he had just managed to relax after constant tension.

‘I see… you must have had a tough day.’

‘It’s not just today, it’s always difficult. If you’re going to visit the Cavalry, can’t you give some notice instead of constantly sneaking in?’

‘You know better than anyone that I can’t do that, Yuder.’

Kishiar had never set foot in the capital since he left his position as the Commander of the Cavalry and returned to Peletta. Of course, that was only official. Despite the eyes and ears the Katchian Emperor had placed around the Peletta region, Kishiar managed to evade them and intrude into Yuder’s bedroom at will. It was a shocking fact that those who reported on the Duke of Peletta as if the world would end even when he simply went to the restroom would drop dead if they knew.

If the people found out that Kishiar La Orr was here alone, the whole capital would be turned upside down. Especially if they knew he was calmly playing a strategy game within the Cavalry.

Since Kishiar only played games, muttered nonsense, and then slept before leaving, Yuder had not reported his unusual behavior until now. But ever since he heard the recent news, he had started to question whether he could continue to tolerate this situation.

The Duke of Peletta was gathering personal Knights and soldiers in Peletta to prepare for a rebellion.

He didn’t know whether it was true or not, but the fact that such rumors were circulating was already a dangerous matter. The young emperor, who was receiving praise for his unprecedented attention to his people, showed no mercy when it came to acts of betrayal. The reason why the Cavalry established by Kishiar La Orr, whom he had been cautious of, had been able to hold on until now was because the Katchian Emperor had considered them, and Yuder, useful pawns. But if the Katchian Emperor heard this news…

Yuder observed Kishiar, who was engrossed in thought, gazing at the tactical game board without uttering a word. He wondered if the rumors about Kishiar were true, and even if he inquired, would Kishiar even deign to respond? Kishiar was someone who hadn’t shared his plans with Yuder, not even when he was about to relinquish his position as Commander. Yuder wasn’t sure whether Kishiar saw any more value in the Cavalry than a discarded childhood toy. With a heavy heart, Yuder sighed deeply. Whether Kishiar knew what was happening around him or not, he remained his usual inscrutable self.

Yuder found himself yearning for the days when he only had to train and follow orders. Assuming the Commander’s role had brought more hassle than satisfaction. The burden he was forced to bear, thanks to the man right in front of him, made his situation even more uncomfortable.

“I thought you were finally awake, but now it seems you’re just lost in pointless thoughts.”

As if reading Yuder’s thoughts, Kishiar murmured. His face, illuminated by the glow of the magic stone stove - the only light in the darkness, flickered in a variety of colors. His sharp jawline, more defined due to weight loss, and the shadows beneath his lifeless eyes might have seemed unattractive, but the man still managed to draw inattention, leaving one breathless.

“I suppose it’s not the right atmosphere to continue the game.”

Kishiar put down the last game piece he held in his hand.

“But next time, I hope you’ll make the game more entertaining.”

“I’m busy. There must be plenty of game partners in Peletta.”

“None.”

None? What did he mean by none? Yuder couldn’t counter his dismissive claim without any evidence.

“I can’t understand why you insist on this game, knowing I’m not particularly good at it.”

“What can I do if I find it amusing to see your gaming habits remain the same, no matter how many times we play?”

Yuder scrunched his nose and stood up from his seat.

“So, you’re now indirectly telling me to change my habit of pushing a single piece forward first. Excuse made. So when will you be leaving today?”

Kishiar briefly squinted, before quickly reverting back to his usual expression. That was the only change Yuder could spot, but he felt a strange stirring in his chest, pressing down on it lightly with his hand. Here it went again. Whenever he was with Kishiar, he felt like this. His heart would suddenly ache for no reason, or it would pound painfully fast.

Evading Kishiar’s gaze that caused him such distress, Yuder moved toward the magic stone stove. He reached into the container next to it to add more stones, but a firm hand reached out from behind and pulled him back.

A magic stone slipped from his grasp and rolled across the floor, coming to rest in a corner. However, Yuder wasn't given the chance to retrieve it.

"Well… when will I be leaving?"

One thing's certain, it won't be anytime soon.

Golden strands of hair cascading near his ear tickled his cheek. A low, husky voice resonated deep within his waist. Yuder shivered as he felt the cold touch penetrating through his clothes. The sensation of leather gloves tracing his bare skin never became familiar, no matter how many times he experienced it.

However, despite his denial, his body reacted instinctively to the intoxicating body scent that wafted from the figure pressed against his back. Sweat began to pool on his body, as if it had been waiting for this moment, and heat started to rise. With the sensation of his mouth becoming dry as though he had placed food before it, and a fiery sensation growing in his lower abdomen, Yuder bit his lip and cast his eyes downward. The man who gently pulled his weakening waist into his embrace, and who caressed the inside of his wrist that he held with his lips, led him towards the bed.

'Yes… maybe the game was just an excuse.'

The man who held his collapsing body on the white sheets, so closely that there was not the slightest gap, and buried his nose in his neck, had breaths so ragged they felt painful.

'I feel like I can live now.'

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Even after awakening from the dream, Yuder lay still for a long while. It was due to the bandages wrapped around his eyes, making it hard to distinguish between reality and dreams.

‘Why did I have to dream about that time?’

In his dream, he saw a time not long after he had become the Commander of the Cavalry. It was a time when Kishiar, despite his retirement, would frequently pop into the Commander’s office, startling him. He had thought that their physical relationship would not continue once Kishiar returned to Peletta, a realization that was foolish to have believed, taking less than ten days to recognize. Looking back, it was an utterly ridiculous event, one of the few in his life.

Recalling the chest pain he had felt while conversing with Kishiar in his dream, Yuder let out a deep breath.

‘I’m sure my memory only carried irritation…was I really so familiar with such pain?’

A very foreign sensation, yet at the same time, oddly familiar. It felt as if a piece of a puzzle that had been missing had just fallen into place.

And Yuder had experienced that sensation before. It was after he had defeated Pethuamet, when all his energy was drained, and his sense of his entire body was briefly disconnected. The confusion and questioning he felt when an emotion he had no memory of suddenly inserted itself naturally to fill a void had returned in exactly the same way.

What exactly was that sensation, that emotion?

A poignant pain that felt like it belonged to him, yet didn’t.

As he touched his chest in a daze, as if tracing that pain, a soft voice came from beside him.

“Are you awake?”

Yuder stopped moving. He slowly turned his head toward the direction of the sound, but all he could see was darkness.

“…Commander.”

“You seemed to be having a nightmare. Your breathing changed several times.”

Kishiar’s voice was as calm as that of a person who was not angry. Yet, that peculiar calmness had a power to it that made it chilling for the listener.

“What did you dream of?”

“…I don’t know.”

Honestly speaking, it was closer to a lustful dream than a nightmare, so Yuder lied. Kishiar did not ask any further.

The surroundings were very quiet. Even when he strained his ears, he couldn’t sense anything. The presence of Kanna and Lusan, who were next to him before he fell asleep, and the noisy sounds from outside seemed as if they had never been there, it was just so silent.

Was it because of the silence, or was it because he dreamt of the past?

Yuder became acutely aware of his hypersensitivity to the man’s presence beside him. It was different from when others were around. Even in the darkness, he could feel his presence as sharply as if it were piercing his skin. In order to escape from this unfamiliar sensation, he forced himself to speak.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“About a day.”

Kishiar responded curtly.

“It seems like it’s night, Commander. Aren’t you going to sleep?”

“…Are you worrying about me now?”

A dry counter-question came back. His voice carried no trace of amusement.

“I apologize.”

Yuder promptly apologized.

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Chapter 292

“I’m sorry.”

But his apology seemed to provoke an entirely different emotion in the other party.

“Sorry, you say… what are you sorry for?”

An even more bitter whisper than before faintly knocked on his eardrums. If he reacted impulsively and apologized again, he feared the voice might shatter. Struggling to speak, Yuder opened his mouth.

“Before… I broke my promise that I wouldn’t get hurt. You told me not to act recklessly, but I did anyway…”

“…”

“And then…”

His mind felt clouded, making it more challenging than usual to gather his thoughts. On reflection, his mouth felt much drier than usual, and his breath felt hot. As if confirming what Lusan said before he fell asleep, the pain reliever’s effect seemed to be wearing off, leaving the monster’s venomous effect to permeate his skin. As his drawn-out words halted and silence descended, Kishiar let out a long sigh. The inconsequential sound of breath strangely felt like a stabbing sword to his heart.

“So you broke all of them, knowing full well what they were about. It must mean you considered the task at hand more important.”

He did, to be honest, but Yuder decided not to answer.

If given the same chance again, he would undoubtedly act to kill Pethuamet. As the only one who knew what disaster the monster could become, it was the best choice he could make, and he didn't regret the result. With Pethuamet dead, countless people would now survive, and long-standing cities and towns would continue to thrive, unbroken.

And the Cavalry members who had bravely fought and fell without anyone's help, and their Commander, who had single-handedly confronted Pethuamet, bloodied and battered, would have been spared from the start.

Although he couldn't explain this to Kishiar, the fact alone was more than enough to justify the ordeal for Yuder. In the darkness that veiled his sight, Yuder cleared his mind of the vivid memory of the white robe at the cliff's edge. And he resolved that, whatever anger Kishiar might express, he would humbly accept it as a deserved punishment.

"When I was young, my dream was to be a hero."

But the reply that came back contained an unexpected story.

"I read stories about the First Emperor of the Empire and the heroes who helped him every day. I couldn't bear to suppress everything I had for the sake of my body, as the people around me advised. I wanted to be a hero who would willingly sacrifice his life for the right cause, who wouldn't regret any sacrifice, and who would move forward…"

His quiet monologue paused momentarily after the last phrase. A faint, empty laughter trickled out.

"Back then, I didn't know how the people around a hero felt."

"…"

“Do you know that after the first Emperor, who achieved a historic task, was called early by the God, the Empress who succeeded him requested in her will that their graves not be placed side by side, but instead laid facing each other forever?”

Yuder slightly shook his head. That simple movement seemed to make his entire brain sway, the inside of his eyes becoming unbearably hot.

“People naturally didn’t comply with her will. So she was simply laid next to the Emperor’s grave. I couldn’t understand it then, but now I have an inkling of why she might have made that request.”

“…Commander.”

As he faintly called him, a hand reached out and gently caressed Yuder’s cheek. Though he was not usually one to run hot, right now the fingertips touching his skin felt unnaturally cold. It seemed his own physical condition was far from normal.

“Yuder Aile, you’ve performed a heroic feat. You have saved us all from a great disaster without fear, standing in place of those who, blinded by their momentary greed, nearly doomed both themselves and everyone else. This is an admirable deed, certainly deserving of praise. As your superior, I too should commend such an action.”

Despite the formal language he consciously used, he could feel the faintest, almost extinguished emotion transmitted through the hand on his cheek.

“…But I can’t.”

His fingers on his cheek started to tremble slowly.

“How can I praise your near-death with a smile on my face? I can’t even comprehend how I could have previously performed such actions without thought. I’m overwhelmed with relentless regrets and

recollections… whether it would have been right to let you go as you wished, or if it would have been better for me to remain… even after contemplating it numerous times, I couldn't find an answer. While I kept telling myself it's alright because you're safe, the situation has concluded well, and we can turn the tables far better than we initially planned, I couldn't forgive myself for thinking that way. It was all unbearable. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The pain in Kishiar's voice was heart-wrenching. He was in the midst of doubting himself, resenting himself, and not wanting to be angry at Yuder. The moment he realized his anger was directed at himself, not him, and he was in torment, Yuder found himself speechless. Suddenly, he couldn't breathe.

"Commander."

Yuder called out to him with difficulty. The trembling hand that held his cheek stopped. He had never wanted to see his face, which must have been looking down at him, more desperately. His chest hurt terribly as if his previous thought that he didn't regret what he had done was a lie. It was like a sculptor hollowing out his ribs with a chisel. Swallowing pain worse than the monster's venom, he hastily licked his lips.

"Commander, it's not your fault. Please just get angry at me. Isn't it my fault for not waiting for you to arrive and only thinking about resolving it quickly, not considering the surroundings? I said the mages could figure out how to cancel the amplification, but when the situation arose, I didn't even think about it…"

"It was wise not to wait for them."

His muted voice coldly interrupted him.

"…Pardon?"

Kishiar didn’t respond. In the silence, heavy as boiling water, the touch of his five fingers on Yuder’s cheek was the only reminder of his presence.

“I thought I’d gotten used to accepting the disappearance of someone from the world… It appears I was wrong.”

His long fingertips very carefully yet frantically stroked over the bandage covering his closed eyes, his forehead, his hair. It was a gesture both Lusan and Kanna had done, but Kishiar’s touch felt fundamentally different from theirs. It was the first time Yuder had ever felt such a painful, caressing touch from someone.

“In the moment I thought you had breathed your last in my arms, until you opened your eyes again, I couldn’t think of anything.”

“…”

“Truly, nothing at all…”

As the man repeated his whispers, his hand ceaselessly stroked Yuder’s hair over his ear.

“And when you opened your eyes and smiled, oblivious to everything… what do you think I felt then?”

Yuder had tried to mutter an apology once more, but the fingertips pressing gently beneath his lips halted his words.

“You always teach me feelings I’ve never felt before. Sometimes you seem to be the only one like me, at other times, you make me feel like a helpless fool unique in this world. But still… I guess that’s okay. As long as you’re alive, nothing else matters…”

The hand that was softly pressing his dry lips withdrew. Yuder, feeling an odd sense of loss, swallowed the pain throbbing deep inside his chest.

Indeed, he would have preferred to endure a few blows or the shouting of his anger. Seeing Kishiar, who was as lifeless as burnt ash, call himself a helpless fool was more painful than any punishment in the world, especially since Yuder was unable to respond.

What was Yuder Aile, who killed him in his previous life, compared to a man like Kishiar La Orr? The words were unbearably painful and so strange he could hardly bear it.

The certainty of his sincerity squeezed his heart even more.

'…Sincerity.'

As he mulled over that unfamiliar word once again, a dream he'd had before waking up surfaced in his mind. Thinking back, the Kishiar from his previous life who came looking for him wasn't always playfully teasing. It didn't make sense for him to break through the strict guard from Peletta to here just to play a game or make love with someone he could do it with anyone, just because he wanted to tease his successor.

At that time, he didn't want to know why he kept coming to him. However, within the desperate warmth of the arms that embraced him tightly in his dream, there was surely a sincerity that he had not expressed in words.

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Suddenly, a sensation Yuder had felt in his dreams once again pierced his heart. It was a pain that set his chest ablaze, hotter than the heat rising from his skin, and he belatedly realized its name - regret.

What if, back then, he had asked Kishiar why he kept coming to him? What if he had inquired more about his increasingly frail state? Perhaps things would have been different. Of course, the likelihood was high that he would not have answered honestly and instead erected walls, as he had suspected at the time. But in retrospect, compared to the countless enemies who attempted assassinations against Yuder Aile, these barriers were not so formidable.

Now in front of Yuder, Kishiar La Orr, who was not yet even thirty years old, was writhing in self-reproach and self-loathing. He was younger than the Kishiar in his dreams and far younger than Yuder was before he died.

Yuder had never thought about the time Kishiar spent in Peletta after his only blood-related brother, Emperor Keilusa and the Empress, passed away. More precisely, perhaps he didn’t dwell on it because he did not bring it up. However, there was no doubt that those times had been hard for Kishiar. As he thought that perhaps the Kishiar in his dreams had come to him to endure this, the pain in his heart grew like a flame fueled by oil, reaching his solar plexus.

In his previous life, Kishiar seemed an entity too distant and difficult to reach. In the eyes of a just-turned-twenty-year-old country bumpkin, Kishiar the Duke was a person from a world too strange to understand by his known standards.

But now, things were different. While his outer appearance might still be that of a twenty-year-old Yuder Aile, the inner core was long worn away from the greenness of that time. In contrast to Kishiar, whose time had stopped almost as it was now, Yuder had aged more than a decade after the time in his dreams.

"…"

It was bitter to realize that even after traveling back in time, he unconsciously treated Kishiar as a much more mature and difficult entity due to the remaining memories from his previous life.

Kishiar also had a childhood, and he must have dreamt naive dreams. He was a common human who could suffer for those he cherished and could not overcome his boiling emotions, revealing self-reproach and hatred toward himself.

He too, was just a human…

Yuder knew what his face would look like in eleven years. He would grow a bit taller, his face would become more gaunt, and several large scars that never faded would appear on his body. On gloomy days, his right hand sometimes became numb.

He could envision the appearances of the other members of the Cavalry several years from now. Ever would cut her long hair short and a long scar would appear on her cheek. Before the Eldore siblings left the Cavalry, they would grow so tall that no one could treat them as children. He knew what Prince Katchian would look like as he aged, and how the members of the four ducal houses, which Kishiar wished to overthrow, would change.

But he could never imagine an aged Kishiar La Orr.

Every breath he took stirred a stinging pain in his heart, which, combined with the heat from his skin, reminded him of the day he

faced death. Since his return, he never deliberately looked back on that last day. What had he been thinking on that day?

Lying beneath the guillotine, the face of someone he had last thought of in his silent rage and despair bloomed once more in the darkness that veiled his vision.

The face that had surfaced only at the very last moment when he could no longer suppress his agony.

It was Kishiar's face.

"…"

Pain cascaded down his spine like tremors. Was the punishment for not being able to see really this gruesome? No matter how he turned his head, he couldn't escape from himself.

Although Kishiar probably didn't intend it, Yuder gasped for breath, feeling as though he was being punished more harshly than anything else. His head throbbed as if it would split open.

"Are you in pain?"

Kishiar, noting Yuder's labored breaths, murmured something and removed his hand from Yuder's face.

"… Bring … for a moment…"

Feeling Kishiar's presence fading, Yuder thrashed about in the torments that consumed his body. He didn't want Kishiar to disappear. But he couldn't properly move his mouth.

'I…'

His consciousness, which had been erratically wavering, darkened again. Yuder was cast into the darkness.

When he regained consciousness, his surroundings were still quiet. But instead of Kishiar, there were others by his side.

“Yuder. Have you come to your senses? If you have, try opening your mouth.”

“…Gakane.”

“Yes. It’s me.”

In the darkness that still obscured his sight, Gakane held his hand. He felt the deep relief Gakane was experiencing through the warmth of his hand.

“Where are the others?”

“They’re out for other business. We’re taking turns looking after you, so as not to disturb your rest. Oh, are you thirsty? Shall I give you some water?”

As Yuder nodded, Gakane cautiously poured water into his mouth. Then, Priest Lusan appeared, asking about his physical condition, and informed him of the situation in a weary voice.

“While you were unconscious, your fever kept fluctuating, rising high then dropping low. We were worried if you would come to your senses once you woke up because the temperature changes were so extreme… It’s fortunate that you’re not feeling pain now.”

According to him, Yuder’s fever was so severe that the damp towel on his forehead would warm up quickly, and when it fell, he would shiver endlessly, as if frostbitten. Currently, his body temperature was falling, and a fever was starting to come again, which was why he felt quite alright. He added this explanation.

“The divine power is still inconsistently flowing. If poured, the venom seeping into the skin disappears a little, but it returns to its

original state as soon as the treatment is over. Although it does not seem to spread as much as before… I don't know how effective this treatment really is."

"I'm… sorry."

Yuder apologized to Lusan with a feeling of regret.

"Gakane, could you bring new damp towels and herbs? They are in the place I told you before."

"Yes."

After Gakane left, Lusan sighed deeply.

"I heard from the Commander, Yuder, that you are weak against monsters. Is that true?"

As soon as Kishiar's name came up, Yuder's chest welled up again. He tried to suppress it and slightly nodded his head.

"Yes."

"I would have stopped you from confronting the monster alone if I knew beforehand… I really regret it."

"Why do you regret, Priest? That was my choice. It's true that my strength is weaker when dealing with monsters… but I went because I was confident that I could definitely defeat it."

After speaking, Yuder hesitated for a moment and then added another word.

"I never thought it would come to this just by being splashed with blood…"

This was truly a major question. No matter how special the situation from which Pethuamet emerged was, even if it was a

monster, it wasn't likely that one's body would react this way simply by being splashed with venomous blood. Pouring in divine power had no effect, and the fact that he had been lying in bed for days, unable to even see, was strange to attribute solely to venom. The likelihood of another cause being involved was high.

Lusan agreed with Yuder's words, his voice sounding slightly stronger.

"You're not the only one. The Commander said the same thing this morning. He mentioned that it's not an issue of divine power or method of treatment, but that the cause of the unchanged condition seems to be elsewhere. He said we need to figure that out. Hence, he is now meeting with the mages of the Western Mage Union."

The mention of mages, a term Yuder hadn't heard in quite a while, surprised him. His last memory of them was of the loud explosion outside when he woke up after being injured.

"Come to think of it, what has been happening since I fainted? I've been in here the whole time and I don't know anything about the situation… I'm still confused even with your explanation."

He was worried that by saying this, Lusan might try to divert his attention again by giving him a sedative, but fortunately, he did not.

"Hmm… the Commander said he would have a conversation with them, so I suppose I can tell you now. He ordered me to try and avoid causing you any unnecessary strain when you wake up."

At his words, Yuder felt a churn in his stomach once more. Whether Lusan knew of this or not, he began changing the bandages wrapped around Yuder while speaking.

"How much have you heard from the Commander?"

“I didn’t hear much. He mentioned something about my independent handling of the monster having worked out for the best…”

“Well, you’ve pretty much heard it all then.”

Lusan’s short response was followed by a brief pause as he continued changing the bandages.

“While you were away dealing with the monster, the leader and others upstairs were working on finding a way to separate the absorbed magic power from the tongue, and the other mages were tasked with holding down the fort. You remember that, right?”

“I do.”

“Shortly after you left, we got news that you had nearly lured the monster to the vicinity of the Magic Spring Ruins. Upon hearing this, the leader ordered several mages to dismantle the amplification and protection circles in advance. He wanted to be prepared even though we hadn’t found a complete way to lift the spell.”

This order was properly executed until a certain point. However, issues arose when some of the mages heading towards the ruins, where the Magic Spring was, discovered a small Pethuamet and a fleeting spark of greed ignited in their hearts.

Among the mages of the Western Mage Union, there were those like Yuder who had strived to maintain their honor. Yet, others held more considerable rage and determination at the prospect of their research potentially failing in this dangerous situation.

They came to the conclusion that capturing the small Pethuamet alive would prove beneficial for future research. Once they started indulging in their greed, even the act of dismantling their magic circles started to feel unjust. The thought of having to give up when it

was uncertain whether Yuder would succeed or fail clouded their judgment.

They secretly captured several Pethuamets by rendering them unconscious. And without fulfilling the task ordered by Micalin, they returned to their base.

This fact was swiftly brought to light by Kanna, who had been meticulously going through the mages' reports under the command of Kishiar.

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“So… what happened?”

“The Commander had not yet returned, so we first confiscated the hidden monsters and isolated the involved mages.”

“They wouldn’t have complied willingly… Was there any resistance from the other mages?”

At Yuder’s anxious inquiry, Lusan fell silent for a moment.

“There was… But the members captured and imprisoned those people as well.”

“I see.”

Yuder realized anew that his comrades were not as naive and weak as he had thought. The firmness with which they had acted, despite his fears that the newly appointed members might be overpowered by the mages in Kishiar’s absence, was almost laughable.

“Thankfully, many mages, including the leader, helped, so there wasn’t much quarrel during the process. After all, if one has any sense of honor or shame, they couldn’t cover up for them.”

The Priest, who began wrapping the bandages again, seemed to be putting much more force into his hands than before. It was not a misperception. Lusan made no attempt to hide his anger towards the mages who had captured and hid the monsters.

“After the Commander brought you, Yuder, I spent all night treating you and couldn’t properly report on it. I only reported after daybreak…”

Only after Yuder’s treatment had somewhat concluded did Kishiar finally emerge from the room. The mages, who faced him as he boldly removed his hat to reveal his face — a contrast to when he first arrived — were all struck dumb and opened their mouths wide in surprise.

There was certainly a tall man among the Cavalry members. But since he was so silent, no one had taken much notice of him. Who could have imagined that such a breathtaking face was hidden beneath his rough hat and cloak? Even Gakane Bolunwald, who had melted the mages’ guard with just his face, lost his luster next to him.

The unidentified man responded briefly to the mages who asked about his identity.

“Commander of the Cavalry, Kishiar La Orr.”

The entire mages present were shocked by his words. Mages, being more traveled than ordinary people, were surprised that they were seeing a member of the Empire’s imperial family up close for the first time. Even if that member was Duke Peletta, notorious for being a headache to the imperial family due to his lack of wit.

They had known that Duke Peletta was the Cavalry Commander, but they had not thought he would be in such a dangerous place. While the mages were swallowing their confusion, their leader Micalin stepped forward to confront him.

“Have you been hiding your identity?”

“I had to, given the circumstances. I trust you’ll understand.”

Even with just a few words exchanged about the current state of the base, the mages quickly realized how different the man in front of them was from the rumors. Kishiar looked at them not with his usual smile but with eyes as cold and dark as frost.

“It seems like it’s time for us to have a frank discussion about how the situation turned out like this.”

After receiving reports from Kanna and the other Cavalry members about the information they had gathered and the story Lusan had told Yuder, Kishiar asked Micalin to confirm the truth. Micalin could not refute it. Among the facts that Kanna had discovered were even dangerous statements and actions by the mages under him, facts that even he, their leader, hadn’t been aware of.

“Someone is risking his life to save you, to the point of lying there on the brink of death, while others can’t even make the bare minimum effort for cooperation and are so engrossed in their own greed as to find this matter amusing. What do you think?”

“…As the Leader, I have nothing to justify. The failure of the mages under my guidance is entirely my responsibility.”

Behind Micalin, who clenched his eyes shut in sheer embarrassment, the mages of the Western Mage Union lowered their heads in silence.

“As the Cavalry Commander, I have no intention of letting this matter slide easily.”

Originally, the punishment of a mage who committed a crime was traditionally and conventionally decided by other mages. The tightly-knit group of mages, bound by secrets and obstinacy, was not lightly open to outside interference.

However, Kishiar declared he would participate in the punishment of the guilty mages alongside Micalin. In the face of his unilateral notification that he would inform the Court Mage Office and the Pearl Tower in the capital if they refused his involvement, the mages of the Western Mage Union couldn’t make any excuses.

Kishiar met with the guilty mages, leading his Cavalry. The icy gaze of the man who smirked coldly at those who couldn't hide their complaints and disrespect towards the Cavalry in their furious eyes was filled with chill.

"Try and kill me if you dare. But immediately, the Cavalry will become the common enemy of all mages," was the rash curse spat out by a mage, to which Kishiar merely nodded.

"Indeed, death would not serve as a proper punishment. You shall personally experience what you considered insignificant and thought you could control."

The punishment he announced seemed superficially simple, but its content was anything but.

At Kishiar's command, the Cavalry members dragged out the mages. They brought forth a small monster that the mages secretly captured, who had been fed part of the magic stones from their amplification circle and left unconscious, and placed it before them.

"If you defeat this monster, no matter what the Leader says, I will not punish you. I won't even ask you to take any responsibility for this incident."

The mages froze. They had only captured it for research purposes; they never imagined they would have to fight and defeat it. But they couldn't just back down without even raising a hand in front of the Cavalry and their comrades. Gritting their teeth, they surrounded the Pethuamet. They began preparing their most difficult and powerful spells.

"Was that alright? What if that monster grows again because of what they…"

It wasn't surprising that the mages tried to create another Pethuamet for their research, but it was shocking that Kishiar not

only didn’t stop them, but also told them to fight it properly. Lusan chuckled softly at Yuder’s astonishment, as if he understood it.

“Don’t worry. Before it began, the Commander told the members and the Leader of the Western Mage Union how to act and guaranteed that he would take responsibility for anything that happened.”

The result came very quickly. The mages were instantly terrified when they saw the Pethuamet swell a bit each time they attacked it. Most of them could count the types of magic they could use without a magic tool on one hand.

Although the monster, initially the size of a palm, had grown only slightly, a few attacks from it mercilessly shattered the protection circle and the remaining buildings that they had managed to restore at the base. Looking around for help, they found no one willing to lend them a hand.

There were those overwhelmed with fear, trying to flee, but the members of the Cavalry did not allow them to escape so easily. They blocked the mages trying to escape and several times coolly drove them back towards Pethuamet. Some, like the Eldore siblings, took advantage of the situation, pretending to stumble and destroying more magic circles than even the monsters could.

The guilty mages resisted and tried to fight back, but there was no one soft enough in the Cavalry to be defeated by such weak attacks.

Amid the chill and wordless response, the mages finally started to feel the bone-aching difference between themselves and their opponents and the terrifying power of a monster that could not be controlled by human strength.

In the midst of the gruesome spectacle that forced them to feel the recklessness of their actions, other untouched mages wore bitter

expressions but none stopped the carnage until the end.

“It was around then that Sir Yuder woke up.”

Assuming Yuder would be startled and rush out if he knew what was happening, they kept the unfolding situation a secret.

Kishiar watched the mages writhing on the ground, finally falling, never showing a hint of pity or laughter. The same was true for the members following him.

The situation finally ended after all the mages expressed their intention to surrender. They held out for quite a while, but in the end, no one could defeat the monster. All they could do was act shamefully, fleeing to prevent the monster from growing and trying to protect their bodies.

After everything was over, Kishiar personally drew his sword and cut down the small monster. The monster, which the mages could not even touch properly, he neutralized with a gesture and quickly transformed into a cold corpse by cutting out its tongue.

In the silence where no one dared to speak, a low voice echoed.

“Remember what it means to try to control the uncontrollable. A fortune like this doesn’t come twice.”

In the end, the guilty mages were expelled from the Western Mage Union and punished by being sent back to the Pearl Tower. Upon returning to the Pearl Tower, they would be faced not with the hospitality of their colleagues, but with a proper investigation and cold punishment.

The Pearl Tower existed within the Empire, but its status encompassed all mages across the continent, not belonging to any single nation. Being expelled from such a group, there were barely

any places left to go. It was both an advantage and a disadvantage of the seemingly broad yet narrow mage community.

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As soon as Micalin announced his decision to expel the guilty ones from the Union, Kishiar seemed to have been waiting, calling in a portion of the Peletta Knights stationed near the base. He ordered the Knights to immediately move to the Pearl Tower with them, ensuring the ousted mages would not set foot in the base even for a moment.

Lusan stated that this move was actually beneficial to the mages.

“If they had not disappeared from our sight immediately, we wouldn’t know what might have happened after their punishment. The look in the eyes of the other members was no joke, including the Commander, of course.”

Included in this group were several others. They were the assassins Yuder had captured and locked away on his own. Being escorted with those willing to kill anyone for money, the lowest of the low, was an unbearable humiliation for the mages who had enjoyed their own privileges.

Nevertheless, Micalin, the Leader of the Western Mage Union, accepted all of this in silence. No one could deny the fact that he was sincerely taking responsibility.

He pledged full cooperation in all future dealings between the Cavalry and the Western Mage Union. If Kishiar wished, he was willing to step down from the position of the Union Leader and cease all research, a statement that shocked the mages under his command. However, Kishiar had only one request of the senior mage.

“Do nothing until my assistant Yuder Aile recovers.”

Although it was an excellent opportunity with the opposing side promising to bend to every demand, all he wanted was silence, not formal negotiations or an outburst of anger.

Thus, the mages could do nothing until Yuder recovered. That is, until today, when Kishiar requested another conversation to understand Yuder's persistent condition from a different perspective.

"So, that's how things turned out. But… what happened to the Star of Nagran?"

Even after all his questions were answered, he knew nothing about the Star of Nagran, the last organization involved in this incident. Lusan only informed them about what had happened to the mages, leaving a void regarding the Star of Nagran. Given that Yuder and Kanna led the investigation into the Star of Nagran, meeting Kanna seemed the best way to hear more detailed stories.

'No news is good news, I suppose…'

"Priest, I brought the items you mentioned. Should I put them here?"

Just then, Gakane returned. He assisted Lusan in carefully changing the bandages on Yuder's limbs and applying medication. Although he said he was angry like Kanna and that it was okay to hit Yuder, he maintained his usual cautious attitude. Yuder hesitated for a moment before addressing Gakane.

"Gakane."

"Hm?"

"I heard about what's been going on from Kanna and the Priest. I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused."

They had traveled a long way for Yuder, their bodies weary. They were sincerely saddened and angered by his severe injuries. Despite having met most of them in his previous life, the emotions they held for each other were completely different now. Initially, he only acted to prevent Kishiar from dying as before, but somehow, the existence of others had grown so significant within him. It was strange. Yuder wanted to convey a heartfelt apology to them, an emotion he had not felt in his previous life.

Then, Gakane came to a halt. After a brief moment, he replied in a voice slightly strained from exhaustion.

“Yuder, after all that you’ve said, you must have really been hurting this time.”

“…”

“I know you went out there alone, trying to protect everyone. I thought that was really impressive. But if you had died as a result, none of us would have been happy. Do you understand?”

“…Yes.”

Gakane might have asked like Kanna, questioning what he understand, but fortunately, he didn’t push that far.

“You know, because of what happened this time, everyone’s begun to dislike the mages. Me too. For the first time in my life, I realized that I could despise people in such a way. Even though I know that there were many who tried to help you… It felt so unfair that it made my blood boil. And it’s worse because all this is due to our weak standing…”

As he spoke, Gakane forced out a weary laugh, patting Yuder’s shoulder gently so as not to cause pain.

“I can’t even begin to imagine the Cavalry without you. So get well soon. The Commander is calling the second dispatch unit, so you must be fully recovered by the time you meet the others.”

“The second dispatch unit?”

The faces of those they had left behind in the Capital floated up in the darkness. Kishiar, who had requested silence from the mages of the Western Mage Union, must not have completely dropped the other tasks after all. His thorough approach was reassuring and typical of Kishiar, but it also reminded Yuder of the last time he saw him trembling, causing a wave of nausea to rise again.

What kind of emotions was he feeling as he handled all that while Yuder was unconscious?

“Yeah. They’re dividing them in half. Half will come to the city of Tainu, and the other half will come here.”

Yuder had thought that after capturing Pethuamet, Kishiar would reduce the size of the second dispatch, but he apparently had no such intention.

‘Is there something else he’s considering?’

“You’re… thinking about work again, aren’t you?”

As if he had read Yuder’s mind, Gakane spoke up.

“No, Yuder. You can’t get involved in anything until you’re healed. Rather than focusing on anything else right now, you should think about getting some rest.”

“…”

If even the easygoing Gakane, who usually avoids unpleasant remarks, said such things, there seemed to be no need to hear the

reactions of the other companions. As Yuder let out a small sigh, both Gakane and Lusan scolded him with one voice, asking why he had acted so recklessly. While it was a painful listen, it did brighten the atmosphere to a certain degree.

“Oh right, Yuder. It seems like the Commander will be handing over the monster subjugation-related tasks to me when the second dispatch arrives. You were supposed to do it originally… but the situation can’t be helped.”

“Monster subjugation tasks to you?”

Suddenly, Yuder remembered that Gakane was one of those who didn’t know about his future. Unbeknownst to him, Gakane was among the earliest to die among the Cavalry members Yuder knew.

The time Gakane had died in Yuder’s previous life was after the death of Pethuamet, later in time. After Yuder’s deployment was stopped due to the nobles’ and various powers’ obstruction and protest toward the Cavalry, who had achieved an astonishing victory in the West where everyone was about to give up, Gakane had gone to finish off the final stages of the subjugation and died in an accident.

Back then, he had found himself unable to genuinely sympathize with the mournful words lamenting the tragic death of promising talent. After all, it was hard enough dealing with the trials directly before him, let alone concern himself with the death of someone he hardly knew.

But now, things had changed. Gakane Bolunwald, a truly precious talent, had left this world at such a young age in such a place. He was a genuinely good man, someone who indeed held enough worth to fight for life in this world.

‘…I can’t help but worry, remembering how an accident occurred after Pethuamet died back then.’

Reading concern in Yuder's tightly pursed lips, Gakane chuckled.

"I'm not a Deputy Commander, just an ordinary member, so I'm not sure if I'll do well… But Kanna told me it would be disrespectful to you, my mentor, if I just kept saying that I couldn't do it. So, I'm going to try my best."

Gakane, despite appearing otherwise, possessed a tenacity that allowed him to train harder than anyone else. However, he lacked confidence in his skills relative to his diligence. If Kishiar had chosen him for the expedition, it was likely to fill in that gap. Yuder, if he had been in the Commander's position, would have made the same decision.

Yuder exhaled quietly, gazing in Gakane's direction. All the hard work had led to everything around him changing. He understood that now, more than ever, he needed not just to soldier on alone, but also to rely on those around him.

To trust those around him, he had to let go of himself. This was the hardest thing for Yuder, who had always tried to shoulder all responsibilities, to be first to stand up and get things done. But given his current situation, which would leave him immobilized for some time, he figured he'd have to get used to it, even if forcibly so.

"…Give it your best. With your skills, it shouldn't be too hard."

After hesitating, Yuder managed to muster words of encouragement for Gakane. Taken aback, Gakane remained silent for a moment, before softly whispering a joyful 'Thank you.'

Thinking back, it was the first time Yuder had said such words to someone, despite his long tenure as a Commander. With a pleasant feeling, he decided to propose to Gakane the recruitment of an aide that he had been contemplating while he watched Gakane wrap a fresh bandage.

“Gakane, I have something to tell you once I get better…”

“What is it?”

“Gakane! Come out! It’s time for a shift change!”

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“Gakane! Come on out! It’s time for the shift change!”

Even before he could finish speaking, the abrupt entrance of the Eldore siblings cut short the conversation between Yuder and Gakane.

“Ah, Yuder is awake. Are you feeling better now?”

“How’s your body?”

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

“Okay? You’re far from okay.”

Following Yuder’s response, Lusan grumbled, to which the Eldore siblings chimed in agreeably. It seemed that the proposal he had intended to make to Gakane would have to be postponed.

“Wait, just a moment. Yuder was about to say something. Just let him speak, and then we can go.”

“What was he about to say?”

Yet Gakane persisted. The Eldore siblings showed interest in his grumbling, which he muttered out strenuously, bearing the weight of the siblings hanging on his arms. Yuder felt a wave of awkwardness as he sensed the eyes around the room turn to him.

“I was going to ask Gakane if he would consider working with me once he has successfully completed this mission.”

“Work? What work?”

“Why is the offer only for Gakane?”

“For… for me?”

The clamorous voices of the Eldore siblings and a stunned Gakane filled the room. Unable to withstand the persistent questions from the Eldores, Yuder finally disclosed his secret, the right to appoint aides, granted to him by Kishiar.

‘It’s alright. I can trust everyone in this room.’

He had not used any of the five appointments yet. Upon Yuder’s orders, they would work together, but that didn’t mean they could skip their regular Cavalry training and duties. The members fell silent upon hearing this.

“So… it means we can be appointed as long as we’re below Deputy Commanders rank?”

“Yes.”

“What? Then we want to do it too. Include us!”

“But you just heard him. It won’t be a pleasure cruise. Currently, he’s considering gathering information for the Cavalry, but we might end up doing other things too.”

“Even better! Gathering information sounds cool! We’re stronger than Gakane, so include us too!”

With a loud yell, something under the bed started to shake. Yuder heard a sorrowful murmur from Gakane, who was laughing awkwardly beside him.

“I admit I haven’t won a single duel yet, but hearing you say it so directly hurts, Hinn…”

“There is no one who doesn’t underestimate us when they see our appearance. We are neither Deputy Commanders nor

Commander, but skilled, acknowledged by the Commander himself. We can do everything without missing out on training, and we're full of enthusiasm. Aren't we just the right fit? Who else could be more suitable?"

Listening to the Eldore siblings' outcry, Yuder began to feel swayed by their arguments.

'They aren't wrong.'

Enthusiasm is important, whatever the task. It could be better to include someone who knows Yuder well and wants to work with him, rather than forcing someone who doesn't want to do it.

"Alright. If you're so insistent, I'll consider it. Let's see how well you perform your duties in the west first."

"Great!"

The Eldore siblings seemed satisfied with the same conditions as Gakane.

"Gakane, what about you?"

When he turned his head towards where Gakane should be, he heard a voice full of warmth, following a moment of silence.

"I'm in too, sounds good."

Gakane returned, his passion incomparable to before. Yuder silently accepted the touch of Priest Lusan undoing the bandage over his eyes, while listening to the Eldore' siblings chatter away. Just a bit of conversation with his comrades and re-bandaging his arms and legs had left him utterly exhausted.

"Sir Yuder, this is the last part. Even if you're sleepy, please bear with it a little longer."

Priest Lusan seemed to notice Yuder's condition. It dawned on Yuder that not only his arms and legs were afflicted by the venom.

"Are the other parts… not needed to be re-bandaged?"

"Yes. Since you had it changed last night… um, it's all unwrapped now. Would you like to open your eyes?"

Something tugged at his nerves, but Yuder followed the command and exerted force on his closed eyelids. A dizzying pain spread, and something faintly wavered in the darkness. No matter how many times he blinked, the dark spots blurring his vision remained unaltered.

"How does it feel?"

"There's a black spot… I can't really tell what's what."

"As expected, there's no change yet."

With a sigh, Lusan applied medicine over his eyes and wrapped them in a new bandage.

"That black spot is the venom seeping into your eyes. It seems it wasn't good that you kept your eyes open after the venom overtook you."

Until then, he hadn't really considered it a great inconvenience, but as his vision darkened again, he remembered the touch of the round candy rolling in his hand. Yuder reached out to touch his clothes, but naturally, his pockets were empty.

"What are you looking for?"

"By any chance… wasn't there something in my clothes when I came back here?"

He asked, thinking that even though they had changed his clothes for treatment, if they had found something in his pocket, they might have taken it out. However, Lusan responded that he didn't know.

"I was too out of it to notice… Ah, the clothes soaked with the fluids were changed by the Commander. Should I ask? If you tell me what you're looking for."

"No, it's nothing. It wasn't anything important."

Yuder closed his mouth immediately. However, he could not suppress the question burning within him and eventually let out another remark.

"Did the Commander really… change my clothes?"

"Yes. It was really amazing."

Lusan responded nonchalantly, gently wiping Yuder's neck and cheeks with a wet towel.

"I actually thought it was amazing that such an individual knew how to change their own clothes, but this incident made me rethink my prejudice. If he hadn't been by your side the whole time, I don't know how you could have recovered so quickly…"

Listening to Lusan's words, Yuder's breathing gradually heated up. He could clearly feel a fever coming on. He absently fumbled with his empty pocket with his fingertips, and then Yuder surrendered his consciousness to the vague darkness.

His dream was terribly messy. Everything was jumbled, and he remembered nothing, but even after waking up, it took a while for him to regain his senses.

Yuder groaned at the splitting headache and gasped for breath. It was too cold. It felt as if his body was filled with cold ice shards that were shaking him from the inside. He wanted to scrape out the ice filling him, but his hand wouldn't move as he wanted. It was only after several failed attempts to move his arm while curled up that he finally regained full consciousness.

"…"

Struggling to steady his labored breathing, Yuder tried to grip his hand. Fumbling and trembling a few times, he finally recognized the large hand clenched immobile between his fingers.

There was no one else with such large hands. Late to arrive, the faint but familiar musky scent made his heart pound in an instant.

"Commander."

His dreadfully hoarse voice slowly seeped out. Only then did the fingers that had been tightly squeezing Yuder's hand slip away.

"What… is this…?"

"I had no choice when you tried to tear off the bandage I had wrapped."

A voice, lower than usual, came in response.

"It seems you had another nightmare."

"…"

"I brought some food; can you swallow it?"

Only upon hearing those words did Yuder realize it had been a long time since he had a proper meal. Although he had no appetite, he was always aware that, for survival and recovery, he had to eat regardless of his desires. As Yuder, who barely nodded, tried to sit

up, an approaching hand helped him sit by supporting his shoulder. Every part of his body throbbed painfully.

“You should drink some water first.”

Yuder reflexively extended his hand.

“Let me drink.”

Kishiar was silent for a moment, but soon handed him a cup. However, Yuder could not overcome the weight of the cup, even before bringing it to his lips, and dropped it. In a blink of an eye, the cold liquid drenched his body and the bed.

Overwhelmed with confusion, he opened his mouth, and the approaching arm swiftly lifted him.

“As I expected.”

At words that seemed to anticipate him dropping the water cup, Yuder turned his head, a cold wind-like chuckle brushing against his cheek.

“What do you mean by ‘as expected’?”

“If I had said that you wouldn’t even have the strength to hold a spoon, my assistant would have definitely disagreed.”

“So you gave me water first?”

“Since I had to reapply the medicine and change the bedding anyway, I thought I’d kill two birds with one stone.”

Holding Yuder, Kishiar headed somewhere. As he sat down, the faint scent of food tickled Yuder’s nose. It was then that he realized that Kishiar had never intended for him to eat in bed. Yuder was flabbergasted, but at the same time, a small ache throbbed in his chest again.

“Please put me down now. I can at least sit on my own.”

“Normally, when a person with several broken ribs says such a thing, we discourage them.”

“But.”

“There.”

With a slight adjustment to his posture, Kishiar, who had neatly ignored Yuder’s request by merely changing the way he held him, began to spoon the soup he had brought into Yuder’s mouth while sitting him on his lap. At a glance, he seemed as composed as usual, but his demeanor lacked the usual light-heartedness and intense emotions he had previously shown. Caught between confusion, a mild sense of shame, and the reflexive relief from the warmth wrapping around him, Yuder swallowed in a daze.

As far as he could remember, even from his youngest days, he had never experienced being cradled in someone’s arms while eating.

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As far back as he could remember, Yuder had never experienced being cradled in someone's arms while being fed. The fact that this someone was Kishiar made the situation all the more surreal.

In his previous life, Kishiar had never done such a thing. Similar to the dream he had once had, during the early stages of the western monster subjugation, when Yuder had sustained injuries to both arms, Kishiar had shown no more concern for him than for any other member. Yuder had accepted this as normal.

Had Kishiar attempted to cradle him and feed him as he was now, given the excessive closeness they had shown due to the effects of the accident during manifestation—something that had led to jeering even within the squad—Yuder would likely have been the first to firmly reject it.

While they managed to deal with the fallout from the accident that had changed everything about the two of them over the course of a week, Yuder Aile's image in the eyes of others remained unchanged. He was seen as a cocky, young Omega Awakener who had easily secured the position of Deputy Commander and the succession to Commander, despite showing little qualification as a leader or winning the acceptance of his peers, apart from his slightly superior abilities. This perception persisted until Kishiar's death.

Back then, he had neither the will to change the situation nor the inclination to persistently make excuses. So he chose to retaliate firmly, either ignoring such views or forcefully suppressing them when they became too irritating. Of course, such an approach typically only made matters worse.

Whenever Yuder clashed with other Cavalry members, Kishiar would sigh and offer advice. However, Yuder of that time, a willful child, preferred to force compliance rather than try to understand and follow the advice. He would become faintly infuriated whenever Kishiar, presuming to understand his situation, would add more and more to his counsel.

Until his death and for some time after his return, Yuder rarely doubted the things he remembered. But now was different.

To what extent were his memories true? To what degree could he trust the emotions and thoughts he believed he had felt and thought?

Although he had always suspected that the dream he had been having was not a mere dream, after catching Pethuamet, his suspicion had transcended conjecture and became an indescribable, profound conviction.

There were many gaps within Yuder Aile. These gaps, located somewhere deep beyond the reach of sight, were so numerous that even he didn’t know the extent of them. To be honest, Yuder still found it hard to believe that he had lived all this time unaware of these gaps within him.

But if these gaps weren’t real, then how could he explain the familiar yet strange fragments of memory and emotion that he felt each time he recalled the past or dreamt, ever since he had killed Pethuamet?

The appearance of these tiny puzzle pieces, seemingly filling the gaps one by one, symbolized something he had been losing. He didn’t know exactly what it was, but he had a painful hunch that it had a deep connection to Kishiar.

If he could not trust his own memories and feelings, what could he use as a basis to move forward in this returned situation?

Reason whispered to him that what he had done so far was right, and that he needn't harbor such deep doubts. Yet, the spark that had been ignited in his heart showed no sign of dying out…

"What are you thinking about?"

Although Yuder's expression was hidden by the blindfold, Kishiar softly asked, as if he had read something from him. Yuder remained silent for a moment before parting his dry lips and speaking.

"I was thinking… you seem overly accustomed to situations like this, Commander."

He couldn't tell the truth. At the moment, Kishiar was displaying such exceptional feelings towards Yuder that no one could doubt it. The whispering voice expressing fear of losing him and sharing agony still lingered in his mind. Just the sensation of being in contact with him simultaneously evoked deep pain and self-doubt within Yuder.

"Don't misunderstand. It's the first time I've done something like this for anyone."

Thankfully, Kishiar didn't notice the thoughts roaming in Yuder's mind.

"If anyone sees me like this, I'll be arrested immediately."

"As long as I'm here, that's not going to happen. Rest assured."

"What if the other comrades come in…"

"Stop."

Kishiar cut him off sharply, put down his spoon, and gently pressed Yuder's head into his arms. The sigh he exhaled sounded extremely loud.

“Instead of using your imagination on such trivial matters, how about thinking more realistically and constructively?”

In a situation that could be considered an insult to an imperial family member, what could be more realistic than this if this was an unnecessary imagination? As if he had read the unspoken question that couldn’t escape Yuder’s lips, Kishiar answered.

“There must be other things you’re curious about. You’ve asked so many questions to Priest Lusan and others about what has happened so far.”

“If I ask, will you answer?”

After asking without thinking, Yuder stiffened his fingertips. Even now, Kishiar promised to tell him anything he could, and he was aware that he kept his promise. Yet he unknowingly asked unnecessary questions, probably due to the continuous dreams and shocks over the past few days.

“Yes.”

Kishiar’s serene voice echoed in his chest like ripples on the water surface.

“As long as you’re not constantly asking why I’m doing this to you.”

There was no way anyone with emotions could ask such a question. Even during meals and conversations, Kishiar continuously brushed Yuder’s hair between his fingers and gently caressed his neck. It was hard to understand what was so pleasing about ruffling short hair, but he never ceased the action. Yuder slightly bit his lips, recalling the touch of the hand that stroked his cheeks and ears tirelessly on the day he woke up.

“I heard… you summoned the second dispatch team.”

“Yes. I split them into two groups, one for Tainu and one here.”

Although it was information Yuder had already heard from Gakane, Kishiar added words they didn’t tell him.

“While monster subjugation is important, the second dispatch team will be doing more investigation-related tasks. Because there will be many tasks requiring a diverse personnel.”

“Investigation?”

“You have an idea, don’t you?”

“About the Star of Nagran and the Magic Spring Ruins?”

As he answered, long fingers lightly stroked behind his ears as if in praise.

“And one more thing. Matters related to the Tain Duchy.”

With just those terse responses, a flood of numerous pieces of information and memories surged in the darkness behind his bandage.

“I’ve heard from the mages that the Tain duchy is establishing a new trade hub within the Great Sarain Forest… Do you believe the rumors that they’re engaging in illicit trade?”

“It’s not just a belief anymore; this incident has solidified my certainty. I was aware of the rumors even before we arrived in the West.”

The voice of Kishiar, who muttered about his good fortune, didn’t sound particularly pleased despite his words.

“The Peletta Knights, whom I had assigned to investigate the Star of Nagran outpost covertly, sent a report. It stated that among those

who stayed there, several nearly fell victim to the illegal trade. I plan to delve deeper into this matter now.”

It seemed that the rumors the mages had conveyed were not unfounded after all. The meticulousness of not overlooking the task of investigating the Star of Nagran outpost in such a short time was impressive, yet it was frustrating to have to hear about such matters without being able to participate directly.

“So, do you intend to continue investigating the Star of Nagran outpost covertly?”

“There were no Awakened individuals who seemed to harbor similar intentions to those we encountered at the Apeto household, based on my direct observation.”

Kishiar had judged that most of those staying at the outpost, located within the Great Sarain Forest, wished to live ordinarily and safely. The majority of them were even unaware of the deeper actions of the group they belonged to.

It was far better to naturally gather information rather than needlessly tracking and investigating the oblivious individuals in a dangerous situation. Yuder sighed lightly at the explanation that the Peletta Knights would handle this task.

There would come a day when such work must be done solely by the Cavalry. His journey was far from over, and his condition hadn’t improved at all.

“How did your meeting with the mages today go?”

“Only now you ask.”

His voice remained flat, but Yuder imagined the corners of his lips curving up in bitterness. It was a look he was familiar with, one he could easily picture.

“I can’t say for certain yet, but I suspect that these spots on your hand, which have caused a number of astonishing incidents so far, may have had an impact on this occasion as well.”

Kishiar held up Yuder’s hand with his own, which had been empty.

“Right before we headed westward, you said it felt as if you had absorbed energy from within my body. What if the same phenomenon occurred this time as well? That thought suddenly occurred to me.”

Yuder understood what Kishiar intended to say from his story alone. Then, he understood why Kishiar had wanted to meet the mages and seek their advice.

“So, you think I absorbed some kind of power from the blood of the monster I vanquished.”

“Exactly, two kinds to be precise. The power of venom and amplification.”

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“Specifically, there are two forces: venom and amplification.”

Yuder felt the tips of Kishiar’s fingers gently wrap around his index and middle fingers.

“The monster absorbed the amplification magic circle, crafted by the mages of the Western Mage Union. The magic it absorbed affected the monster’s flesh, which meant……”

“You’re implying that it seeped into its bodily fluids as well.”

“That’s correct.”

Then, Yuder recalled the moment when he was soaked in the liquid, which had absorbed those two forces. He vaguely remembered the black and cold fluid that had covered his body when he cut off Pethuamet’s tongue.

“Even though I keep pouring in divine power, the venom that seeped into your body doesn’t disappear, but keeps returning, even expanding. I think that’s because of the influence of the amplification. You can understand why the abilities that should have recovered with rest have not yet returned, it’s probably because I’m spending more energy on blocking the roots of the venom that have burrowed into your body.”

True to his words, Yuder was still far from fully recovered. It was a bit better than the first time when he barely summoned a drop of water, but it was still just a few more drops, barely an improvement. It was even hard to say that he had recovered at all.

“So I met with the mages and reviewed the records they had left when they created the amplification magic and its overall structure.”

After a few days, Kishiar, who had reappeared, asked the mages for information about the structure of the amplification magic. Micalin thought that the time had finally come. He had been worrying about what to say if the Duke of Peletta, filled with anger, ordered to eradicate the very existence of the amplification magic from this world. But after the conversation, Kishiar, who had been lost in thought for a long time, spoke unexpectedly.

"…I asked them to find the answer to the question that you wanted to know that night."

Kishiar, briefly explaining what he had said to Micalin, spoke with an entirely different stiffness in his voice than Yuder had ever heard before. Would he have spoken in such an emotionless voice even in front of the mages? Yuder tried to guess Kishiar's attitude, which he had not seen, just from his voice and slowly questioned.

"That night, you mean…"

"The task of exploring the traces of magic that remained on the monster's tongue that you gave them and finding a way to neutralize it."

Micalin hadn't finished that task until Yuder had killed Pethuamet. He had to stop and hadn't resumed the work because he had to deal with Kishiar and the Cavalry after that. The mages, who had thought that task would remain useless and had forgotten about it, were surprised as if their eyes would pop out at Kishiar's request to resume the task.

"If the problem is the amplification force interfering while trying to eliminate the venom that has penetrated your body, finding and eliminating the traces of the amplification magic within might be the solution."

That was the conclusion Kishiar had come to while watching Yuder's treatment. Yuder thought about the words he had just heard

while firmly holding his body in his arms. Kishiar knew more about magic than him, so his words could be the solution, but there was a bit that bothered him.

“It’s true that I’ve absorbed energy before, but back then, I could clearly see and feel what I was doing. But I didn’t feel the red energy leaking from my hands until the end of this battle…”

“Isn’t it a different law for attack and defense even in the same battle?”

The soft voice continued to speak.

“Think of it this way. Your body is a battlefield, where the internal forces you possess are fighting off the toxicity of the monster that has invaded from the outside. Right now, it’s a fierce struggle of survival between the reinforcements of amplification and divine power.”

Yuder recalled something Enon had once said. There was a strangely consistent part in Kishiar’s explanation with Enon’s words that the process of detoxifying with divine power is not to erase it, but to weaken and harmonize it.

‘But even so, I don’t know whether the answer found by the mages will definitely have an effect on me.’

Was it really the right path to make the mages touch the Amplification circle and Pethuamet’s tongue again for an uncertain outcome? Thinking that Kishiar might be doing unnecessary work because of that, he felt a suffocating sensation in his stomach.

As Yuder let out a small sigh, Kishiar asked him quietly.

“Do you think my decision was wrong?”

Kishiar’s choice. The weight of those words pounded heavily on Yuder’s chest.

Since he returned from death, he had never doubted Kishiar’s choices. However, this time it was related to Yuder himself, the greatest cause of differences between his two lives, and a choice about an event that had not occurred in his previous life.

After hesitating for a long time, Yuder spoke.

“Isn’t there another option besides this method?”

“Such as?”

“Maybe…we could reveal it to others and seek more sufficient answers.”

What flitted across Yuder’s mind was Enon. He wondered if Enon’s insight and knowledge could give a more unique and clear solution to this situation.

“Well… I have called the only remaining medical officer in the Cavalry. That was one reason why I called for the second dispatch early. But even if they come as fast as they can, we still have to wait for a few more days, and there is no guarantee that they will immediately provide a solution.”

At the unexpected words, Yuder, who turned his head, suddenly felt a much stronger grip on his hand than before.

“Then isn’t it better to try something we can do more quickly? I…”

His calm words trembled oddly at the end.

“I don’t want to see you suffer in front of me any longer.”

He felt as if something had dropped heavily inside his heart.

“So…please don’t call that a wrong decision.”

His arm, which had been holding him, grew stronger, pressing their bodies closer than before. The body that was touching him conveyed a strange heat and pain at the same time. Listening to the dark voice as deep as the bottom of the deepest sea, Yuder recalled his painful breath in his dreams. With gritted teeth, Kishiar continued as if he couldn’t bear it anymore.

“Even more than when I felt my vessel was gradually breaking every hour, in some ways, I feel it’s harder to endure now. If you don’t get better soon, I don’t know what I’ll end up doing. Even though I try to be patient, it seems like this is my limit…”

A whisper pleading not to reject him if he cared about him even a little echoed in his ear. Yuder said nothing, suppressing his boiling emotions.

The soft touch of the arms that embraced him evoked feelings he could hardly put into words. The pull he felt was irresistible, the heat he felt then was far stronger than the one he felt when their lips first met, and it felt like his breath was taken away multiple times over.

Rational thinking would have him distance himself a bit and try to calm Kishiar down. After all, he seemed to have lost some of his usual calmness due to excessive worry.

But, so what?

All the countless holes inside him that caused him worries and fears, the anxiety that would creep in when he thought about the past and future, all of that disappeared into the distance when he was close to Kishiar. The situation where Kishiar, who didn’t hide his distressed state caused by worry for him, held him so tightly that he could barely breathe was strangely comforting. It seemed that he, too, had lost his sense of calm…

Yuder forgot about the worry of someone coming in. Maybe it was okay to keep being like this.

It was the first time he was aware of this desire since he felt the pull toward Kishiar.

Perhaps thinking that the trembling mixed in with his bewildered breath was due to pain, Kishiar loosened his tight hold on him and moved away a bit.

“I’m sorry. You must be hurting…”

At that moment, Yuder managed to raise his arm and embraced him. Even without seeing, he knew exactly where to hold him. At Yuder’s words, Kishiar’s body stiffened, and his speech stopped altogether.

“When did I ever say that your choices were wrong, Commander?”

Even though it felt incredibly hard to utter a single word, he didn’t stop.

“I don’t care if you cast a magic spell to release the amplification power, or whatever you do. Do anything, but… stop doing this. My heart keeps hurting… I think it would be better to face it.”

Usually, his tongue moved effortlessly, but at that moment, it struggled to convey what he wanted to say. But, he didn’t need to worry.

Soon after, Kishiar, who had been rigid and still, held him even tighter.

“…Right. I can’t do that.”

Kishiar whispered with a smile.

“Because it won’t do if I hurt you more when you’re already in pain…”

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Afterward, Kishiar lowered his head onto Yuder’s shoulder, lightly resting it there, and remained silent for a while. Yuder, too, left Kishiar’s hand, which was wrapped around his shoulder, just as it was.

From the edge of the chest where Kishiar leaned, he could feel the regular yet rapid beat of a heart - the most certain evidence of life that could never be felt from the dead.

Although they seemed to bind each other, an odd tranquility, free from suffocation or strangeness, briefly wrapped around the two. Despite knowing that reality hadn’t improved, for a moment, an absurd feeling visited them, as if everything had become perfect. It was a highly deceptive emotion to experience, embracing the man he had killed in his previous life.

Where did this bizarre satisfaction come from? Yuder quietly pondered. Naturally, he could not find an answer. A wave of bitter and unfamiliar emotions kept surging and receding.

‘Do others also feel this way when they embrace each other?’

Was it normal to endure the shock of the self, that one believed until now, melting away under an irresistible attraction and impulse?

Yuder thought it was unlikely. Had there been another person in front of him, there would have been no chance that he would have felt the urge to reach out, squeezing out the remaining strength in a situation where it was difficult to move even a finger. It was because it was Kishiar that he had moved. Despite the bitter pain, the reason he didn’t remove the embracing hand was because a greater desire resided within Yuder.

“Emotions are strange.”

Suddenly, Kishiar opened his mouth slightly.

“Armed with logic and patience, compared to reason, it doesn’t hold a single weapon yet it defeats the target faster than anything else, turning it into a loser. If the result of being defeated by emotions is always this sweet, nobody would want to fight from the beginning…”

Apparently, he was having similar thoughts to Yuder. The man who sighed, making his skin tingle, leaned his head on Yuder’s shoulder like a weary deer.

“To be unable to think of anything because of this mere thing, the arrogance I’ve had so far is laughable.”

“It’s not laughable.”

If the fact that all emotions were melted by the hand of the other person, who reached out first, was laughable, then Yuder himself should have been the butt of a joke many times over. He had always lost himself at the mere gesture of Kishiar.

“Even if I say that I don’t want to do anything else because I want to sustain this moment?”

“That is… I feel the same, so it’s not laughable at all…”

As he hesitated and replied, he felt a low chuckle through his shoulder as a vibration. Yuder felt his arms hugging him tighter than before.

“Right. Then let’s indulge in this desire a bit more.”

Each time he took a deep breath, a good scent, strong enough to numb his head, subtly emanated from their touching bodies. It was

the unique body scent of Kishiar, completely different from the perfume created by humans. The fact that the scent, which was only occasionally perceived usually, seemed so intensely filled in an instant was probably due to his emotions moving so intensely.

When he inhaled it, something inside him also seemed to move as if it was being drawn in with it. It was a tingling yet hot sensation, like an invisible hand that seeped in like smoke, gently kneading and tangling something asleep inside.

Yuder was once again aware of the fact that he and Kishiar were Omega and Alpha Awakener respectively.

"…Sweet."

He thought his own thoughts had slipped out of his mouth, but it was Kishiar who had spoken. He slowly rubbed Yuder's nape with his hair, taking a deep breath.

"I never understood why such a scent came to be… but now, I feel like I understand a bit."

As his nose gently grazed below his chin, a shiver ran down his spine.

"If I had not known this sweetness, I probably wouldn't have been able to find you then…"

Upon hearing 'then', his puzzled mind soon found an answer. Kishiar was talking about the moment when he found Yuder, who had single-handedly faced Pethuamet by piercing through the Great Sarain Forest in the darkness.

Yuder, rather blankly, felt a belated question arising, 'Come to think of it…' The late arrival of Kishiar at the precise location so quickly was almost miraculous in the Great Sarain Forest. The color-changing magic that the mages had hung on the trees to guide

Yuder was a temporary measure and would have disappeared shortly. Kishiar had no one to guide him. So, how was he able to find him without any hesitation?

“Did you… Did you find me so quickly back then… because of the scent?”

“Yes.”

“How…”

“Well… Even I am not exactly sure how it was possible.”

However, the moment he thought he had to find Yuder, he felt as if something beyond his senses from within his body had awakened.

“All I know is that at that moment, everything felt different than before. Suddenly, I realized there was a thin thread inside me, unknown even to myself, that was connected somewhere. I could feel that you were at the end of it, somehow… even without any reason, a conviction so strong I couldn’t doubt it.”

He ran through the forest, following the direction that sense pointed to. As he ran along the frail thread that seemed to break at any moment, he felt closer to the answer he had been searching for. From the thin, invisible thread, a faint sweet scent wafted.

“It was certainly your scent.”

Kishiar murmured, once again taking a deep breath.

“That sense disappeared after I found you… but I’m sure it wasn’t a dream.”

It was an enigmatic experience, literally. He had never heard of anyone experiencing such a thing in all the memories of his previous life. Scent was a characteristic that most who manifested a second

gender had. As the heat period approached, it became stronger against their will, attracting the opposite sex, but it did not play the role of finding someone specific.

‘A thread… and a connection.’

He had a feeling as if he knew something, but his mind was so fuzzy that it was hard to continue thinking.

“It’s strange…”

Kishiar smiled faintly.

“But it’s a good thing. After all, thanks to that, I found you.”

It would have been better if he had found him a little earlier. The murmuring voice sank once again. Yuder felt a hand gently stroking the bandage over where his eyes were.

“….I never knew that not being able to meet your eyes would be such a regrettable thing.”

There was undeniable self-reproach for not having arrived a bit sooner in his voice. This made Yuder feel a sudden pain in his heart. What expression was Kishiar making as he said these words now? Even if he tried to imagine, he couldn’t depict it.

Looking at the silent Yuder, Kishiar quietly asked.

“Are you… scared of not being able to see?”

He was not scared. Even though he couldn’t see or exert strength, he didn’t regret it. Not at all.

However, he did feel a twinge of regret that he couldn’t meet Kishiar’s gaze, so vividly felt through his skin, with his own eyes.

“…I’m not scared, but I do feel a bit regretful.”

“What aspect?”

Yuder turned his head towards where the beautiful, sunlight-breaking red pupils likely were. A thought skimmed across his mind, questioning whether he was even qualified to speak such words, but his mouth moved faster.

“I can’t see… what expression you’re making now.”

Kishiar said nothing for a moment.

Soon, a surprising burst of heat flared between their touching skin. Before Yuder could react to the sensation, a trembling breath echoed in his ear.

“…Now I understand what it means to go mad.”

The feeling of hot lips brushing just beneath his ear was spine-tingling.

“To say such things without knowing how much I’m holding back… don’t you think that’s terribly cruel?”

His trembling arms, which had been holding Yuder almost painfully tight, finally relaxed after several breaths.

“Don’t turn me into a shameless person, asking if it’s okay to touch someone who is hurting.”

Kishiar’s heated desire was conveyed vividly beyond the darkness veiling Yuder’s eyes. It felt as if he could physically touch it.

He wanted Yuder.

His emotions had not wavered, not even when Yuder was covered in venom, horrifically battered and bruised.

The sight of such a resolute man revealing himself so candidly in front of him touched Yuder's heart painfully.

"So, is it alright if I touch you instead?"

"Where?"

Driven by an irresistible impulse, Yuder strained to move his hand. He thought he could discern the expression Kishiar was making if he could just feel it, even if he couldn't see it. As the tip of his fingers lightly touched Kishiar's jaw, he felt the skin there stiffen slightly from tension. He wanted to feel more, but he lacked the strength in his arm. Then, Kishiar caught his slipping hand, gently pulling it and helping him to caress his cheek.

"…Alright. If you want, anywhere is fine. I'll help you."

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Chapter 300

“…Alright. If you want, anywhere is fine. I’ll help you.”

His overlapped hands slowly traced his face.

There was no particular sensation when Kishiar touched his face. But when Yuder felt the touch of the other’s skin in his hands, it felt strangely unfamiliar. As his hands glided across the smooth cheeks, the straight nose, the warmth hidden behind the strands of hair, and the soft forehead, Yuder traced the features of Kishiar in his mind.

The sensation of the long eyelashes brushing his fingertips tickled. From just that fleeting touch, he knew Kishiar was smiling with his eyes closed. His heart began to race faster. When Yuder’s hands grew slightly firmer, Kishiar gradually withdrew the force from his hands that were supporting him. Yuder, who had been too weak to move independently just moments ago, was now touching Kishiar’s face entirely on his own volition.

His cautious movements gradually quickened as if bewitched. He hadn’t even realized when one hand had turned into two.

‘So, this is what his face felt like.’

Every touch drew a new image of the face in his mind. The things he thought he knew felt utterly unfamiliar. Kishiar didn’t resist, no matter where Yuder touched. He just passively surrendered, exhaling hot breaths sporadically.

Finally, Yuder’s hands moved down past the nose, towards the lips. A part he had consciously avoided, but now it was the only place left untouched. As he gently caressed the upper lip and fumbled towards the end, a sigh, as though waiting for him, arose.

A smile-filled breath flowed out through the slightly parted lips.

“…That tickles.”

The whispering lips brushed the tip of Yuder’s fingers, then pulled away. In that instant, Yuder felt he could no longer resist merely touching him. The once gentle feelings boiled over into a fervent hunger.

He pulled at the hands that were cradling Kishiar’s face, moving closer, as though if he came any nearer, he’d be able to see past the bandages. Kishiar’s previously smiling cheeks tensed up.

The moment their lips overlapped, regrettable heat consumed his mind. Kishiar, who had seemed to be gently trying to push him away, froze.

“…”

Feeling the laughter disappear from Kishiar’s lips through his own was a strange sensation. Despite having touched these lips countless times, the mere fact that he had been the one to initiate the touch made everything feel new.

Kishiar tried several times to remove him, placing his hands on Yuder’s back, but he could only grab onto the hem of Yuder’s clothing, not being able to stop him.

Awkwardly, he parted the lips and touched the stiffened tongue. When Kishiar hesitated, releasing his breath and attempting to pull his head back, the hand that had been pushing Yuder away suddenly changed its direction and pulled him closer. In the unending darkness, only the tangible heat felt like a vivid reality.

Breaths, heavy with unsatisfied desire, intertwined, flowed from their locked lips, paused and resumed. The pounding heart he could

feel against his chest was so intense it felt like it would burst. Whether it was his heartbeat or Kishiar's, Yuder couldn't tell.

All he wished for was that the presence held desperately in his hands would not disappear.

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Until now, all the kisses between Yuder and Kishiar had been initiated by Kishiar, reaching out first. But this time, it was the other way around - Yuder was the one who moved first. A deep sense of self-loathing stirred within him, yet on some level, it felt as if he had long yearned for this moment.

Despite the realization that it was wrong, he could not contain his desire. In the moment of contact, he even forgot about his own physical condition. He was oblivious to how far he might have gone if he had not felt the sting in his cracked ribs from his intense breathing.

It was as if he had become a blind man lost in his emotions.

'…No, I am indeed blind now.'

Yuder sighed softly, feeling the rustle of the fresh bandages that Kishiar had changed for him. He had not known until then that Kishiar had been the one to change his clothes and bandages while he was unconscious.

Such a task could have been entrusted to Lusan or others, yet he found himself speechless against Kishiar, who replied curtly that the one caring should be the one most certain.

"Is it over now? Does it hurt?"

"…Yes."

Finally securing the bandage around his waist, Kishiar threaded a new shirt on his arm and quickly buttoned it up. Though his touch bore no warmth, each time Yuder felt his gaze brush against his skin, his swollen lips tingled in response. Yet each time, his ribs also throbbed, so Yuder endeavored not to focus on his emotions.

“Are you still hungry?”

“I’m fine.”

“Your fever… seems to be rising again.”

The cold that had filled his body when he first woke up, as if he was encased in ice, had long since dissipated. The hand that touched his burning forehead dropped away with a sigh.

“I regret it. I should have refrained.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“Save your apologies until you’re fully healed.”

The hand that had been sweeping back his disheveled hair dropped away. The cold wind that he hadn’t felt while they were close together seemed to belatedly chill his heart. Yuder opened his mouth slowly amidst his clouded senses.

“Still, I’m sorry.”

“What do you have to be sorry for?”

He couldn’t say what he was sorry for. Because he himself didn’t have all the answers. As Yuder remained silent, Kishiar let out a small sigh.

“I’ll stay here until you fall asleep. Then, I’ll go find a way to remove the traces of the amplification circle with the mages.”

“There’s no need for you to do so much…”

“There is. I can’t trust them completely. Once we find the answer, I plan on removing the traces of the amplification circle myself.”

“…But won’t that reveal to everyone that you possess the power of a mage?”

“That’s true. But it doesn’t matter. Have you forgotten? I came here to announce that I’m the owner of the divine sword.”

His pleasing voice emitted a dry chuckle.

“It’s time everyone knew. Who I am, who we are.”

So that no one could ever take them lightly again.

He seemed to hear the unspoken words in his head.

“In order to do that, I need to know exactly how much of a weakness you possess. I need to gather as much information as possible about your current state… Are you okay with that?”

When Yuder remembered Kishiar’s expression upon discovering the fact that his power did not properly work against monsters, an image of it flickered across his mind before disappearing. He had expected him to be upset about the concealed weakness, but instead, his surprising request to be the one to share it caught him off guard.

“Of course.”

“So far, only I and Priest Lusan are aware of this. Others might have figured it out on their own, but officially, they’ll act ignorant unless you bring it up.”

His casual way of speaking was possible only because, even in the urgency of the situation, he tried his best to respect Yuder’s will.

Suppressing the sharp pain that sprang up again in his chest, Yuder nodded.

“Thank you. I’ll tell the others.”

“Good.”

“I will tell Commander now…”

“What do you want to discuss in this heat? Let’s talk about it next time.”

“But…”

“Is it because you’re still concerned about what was said before?”

Kishiar hit the nail on the head. he sighed and continued speaking.

“It’s okay. Of course, when I first noticed, I wished you had told me earlier. However, I don’t think knowing in advance would have been able to prevent the situation we’re in now.”

“…”

He could feel his gaze sweeping over his bandage-covered body.

“It’s not a matter of trust, it probably just seemed natural to you. You, accustomed to being alone, couldn’t have changed your nature overnight.”

Yet again, he asked nothing of Yuder. The weight of that fact pressed heavily on his chest.

“I…”

The advice that briefly crossed his mind was one that Kishiar in his previous life had often given. Despite having the same meaning,

it felt much weightier than when he'd heard it in his dreams. As he struggled to come up with something to say, opening and closing his mouth in stupor, Kishiar gently intertwined his fingers with his.

"It's okay. I'm already satisfied that you reached out to me first. So you don't need to push yourself today. There's still plenty of time…"

Plenty of time? What a strange thing to say. It felt even more odd to Yuder than being told he didn't need to try harder. He exhaled deeply, feeling his tension unwind.

"I hope you don't have any nightmares this time…"

his faint voice was the last sound before all became silent.

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The following day, Yuder woke up in a state where he had not dreamed at all. The same was true for the day after that, and the day after that one too. Yuder spent the longest time doing absolutely nothing he had ever had throughout his two lifetimes. He spent most of his time sleeping, and when awake, he shared conversations with his comrades who took turns guarding him.

Kanna had cheerfully informed him of the news around them, and Gakane had earnestly pondered and sought advice on the best ways to use his abilities in different situations. Listening to the ceaseless chatter of the Eldore siblings often sent him back into a slumber, and he found himself able to have lengthy conversations with Emun, with whom he had had no particular ties before arriving in the West. He was becoming increasingly accustomed to Priest Lusan's nagging, who carefully looked after him. Yuder thought that even if he had retired in his previous life after aging, he would not have been so idle.

Yuder also shared his weaknesses and limitations with them. Talking about the limits of his abilities had always been his biggest secret, but surprisingly, it did not feel like such a significant weakness when he opened up to others about it. The indifferent reactions of his comrades who heard his story further reinforced this feeling.

"You're not entirely unable to use your power against monsters, right? It's impressive compared to me who has no combat abilities at all!"

Kanna had said, to which Gakane had added with an awkward laugh, "Kanna's right. Your indirect approach seems stronger than my ability to use power properly, so I don't think it's such a big

weakness… Of course, we can’t afford to have more situations like this last one.”

The conversation flowed on, with Kanna followed by Gakane’s words.

“What a letdown, I was thinking of learning about your weakness to tease you later, but it’s no use if that’s all it is. You can only use the power to create cliffs once a day, but what need is there to use it more than once a day in the first place?”

“That’s right. Are you bragging now?”

“Still, it’s a relief that you already know how to solve it. How did you come up with that? If it were me, I would have been too scared and would have just avoided encountering monsters.”

Amid the Eldore siblings who quickly lost interest, Emun asked seriously. Yuder recalled Kishiar from his dream, who had given him the task to figure out ten ways to clean up debris without using his power directly.

If not for Kishiar’s words, Yuder might have completely lost confidence in his power and retired as is. A wave of complex thoughts came crashing, then faded away with a minor pang of pain.

“…It wasn’t my idea.”

“Then whose?”

“I was advised to think of other ways if the power doesn’t work directly.”

At his casual remark, the eyes of all his comrades sparkled in unison.

“Wow, from whom?”

“Don’t tell me, you’ve met another Awakener before joining the Cavalry?”

“I think it’s the first time I’ve heard about Yuder’s story before joining the group.”

He couldn’t tell them that he had turned back time. Yuder kept silent, then broke into a faint smile. His comrades inferred that the smile was a sign of affirmation and marveled at it.

“That’s interesting. How did you meet such a person when you said you were living alone in the mountains?”

“Who is it? Did they also join our group? Are you still in contact?”

Kishiar was present within the Cavalry now. However, the Kishiar who had given him that advice had been long dead at the time. They were the same person, yet they existed in different times.

After a silence slightly longer than before, Yuder finally spoke.

“Now, we can’t meet.”

“Huh? Why… Ouch!”

Emun, who had been about to ask an intrigued question, shrieked as Kanna jabbed his side. Kanna gave an apologetic look towards Yuder, who remained as impassive as always, then motioned to the rest of the members.

Emun, receiving a potent look that clearly conveyed ‘Can’t you take a hint?’, opened his mouth, feeling utterly wronged.

“Sorry, Yuder. We just remembered we have something to attend to, so we’ll be off.”

“That’s fine. You’ve been here too long; you need to rest.”

The members stood up in unison, leaving behind somewhat awkward farewells before disappearing. Outside the closed door, faint quarreling could be heard. ‘Can’t you tell from Yuder’s expression? He’s talking about someone who’s dead!’, ‘No, how the hell am I supposed to know that from his blank face?! It’s not like I can read minds!’

Yuder sighed once his thoughtful comrades had disappeared. He had tried his best to seem nonchalant, but apparently, he couldn’t fool Kanna.

This was the first time he had spoken to anyone about Kishiar, even though it wasn’t directly related to the topic at hand.

After Kishiar’s death, he was quickly forgotten everywhere. Most of the members who had remembered him left the group, and it was only natural since the nobles had to mind their words in front of the new emperor. Peletta, welcoming a new lord, returned to its usual desolate, insignificant state, and the Peletta Knight Order, once known as the Duke’s Knights, was dissolved on charges of rebellion and scattered without a trace.

The few initial members who remained refrained from mentioning Kishiar. At first, some people came to Yuder, asking if the rumor that he killed Kishiar was true, but when he remained silent, they each made their own conclusions and disappeared.

Years passed, and the continental political landscape changed dramatically. Unlike the Orr Empire, which was losing power rapidly due to continued disasters and chaos, Nelarn and a few other countries grew rapidly to the point of proclaiming themselves empires. With earthquakes, droughts, and all kinds of disasters continuing and countless people dying, people stopped remembering the names of the dead.

The same was true for Yuder. Kishiar was the first person he had killed, but not the last. He saw no reason to particularly remember

the first person he had killed when the bodies of those he had killed to carry out the secret orders in the Cavalry piled up like a mountain behind Kishiar.

The memories and emotions he once had, too, he deemed it natural for them to become sedimentary, rot and vanish.

'…That's how it was until recently.'

Yuder leaned against the bed, smelling the thick scent of grass mixed with the soft wind blowing in through the window left open by someone. Perhaps it was the time when the fever fell and the body temperature lowered, even the breeze that would have been considered cool normally made his lips cold and his body shiver. However, he didn't cover himself with a blanket and just endured the chilling cold.

'Memories and emotions.'

After defeating Pethuamet, he continuously pondered over the puzzle-like emotions within him whenever he had time. He was unsure where these prismatic emotions, which he hadn't realized he'd lost, came from, or why they returned. Fully understanding the reason was still difficult, but after hearing what Kishiar had felt this time, one aspect occurred to him.

'I'm not sure about the one he called thread, or what… but there was indeed a commonality within the emotions that returned to me.'

Whenever he saw Kishiar in his dreams, the breathtaking emotions he felt were always accompanied by a sensation similar to a throbbing pain. Despite never experiencing such a sensation in his original memories, the unfamiliar yet familiar parts in his dreams overlapped with what he had previously considered.

'And another thing. Although it felt so familiar, I couldn't be certain that the pain was fully mine.'

It was peculiar to feel that even though he was feeling the emotion, he couldn't determine if it was his. If it wasn't his, whose was it? He had taken it for granted in his dreams and moved on, but when he cleared his head and reconsidered, it was not his usual self.

'But if those thoughts and emotions were actually the truth…'

If that made sense, there was only one cause he could infer. That aspect was also related to the foreboding feeling he had after hearing Kishiar's story.

'The accident that occurred during the second gender manifestation in my previous life.'

Just thinking about it made him feel stifled, and Yuder took a deep breath to suppress the sensation in his chest. He could feel his hand growing colder.

That accident was one of the most shocking incidents in his previous life, ranking within the top three. If the heat period overlapped with the second gender manifestation, the probability of the person who happened to be present at the time also having an opposite second gender while also in heat was minuscule. However, due to the unfortunate alignment of bad luck, Yuder had spent days cooped up, entangling bodies with a beast-like Commander, and had to suffer the misfortune of being reduced to a wretched state.

He had very little memory left of what had happened then. But one thing was certain. While he was tangled up, he did not know whether the place had changed or whether days and nights had passed, but he continually felt as if something inside him was being ripped apart and was being messily mixed with something that came from outside.

The pain, as if something unseen and ragged pieces were arbitrarily stitched together.

It wasn’t just a simple analogy. He couldn’t explain it, but it truly was something that had happened within him.

Since that accident didn’t occur in this life, he had pushed away the memories of his previous life with a somewhat relieved heart. He thought he could forget about it as if it had never happened, but if the disappeared emotions and memories inside him were related to it, what should he do?

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The thin thread Kishiar had spoken of and the sensation Yuder felt in his previous life, as if being torn and stitched together, seemed very different yet similar in the aspect that they both felt ‘connected’ to each other.

It was a complex feeling beyond description, to be reminded in this way of an experience never spoken of by any second gender manifestor in his previous life.

“What are you thinking about?”

Just then, a familiar voice came along with the sound of a closing door nearby. Only then did Yuder break free from his deep contemplation and turned his head. He felt an approaching presence from beyond the unseen darkness. It was a unique presence of Kishiar, silent like a beast stepping on the ground, yet its existence was so palpable, he could feel it on his skin.

“Just… thinking.”

“You’re so pale, and you’re not even covered with a blanket?”

Kishiar, who had closed the window, approached and touched Yuder’s forehead.

“You’re cold indeed. Wait a moment.”

Beside Yuder, who was constantly fluctuating between fevers, there were always towels, a chamber pot, and a heat-retaining grain pouch that kept warm for a long time.

Yuder felt the formless mist-like power moving right next to him. After a moment, he felt a warmth from the pouch on his belly, so

comforting that it seemed to melt his previous chill.

“You used magic.”

“You felt that?”

“Yes. Is it okay for you to use your power so freely?”

Since losing his sight, some of his senses had become more acute. In particular, his sense of detecting unseen energy was so refined that he could vaguely distinguish when Kishiar used a power other than that of an Awakener, as he did now. As Kishiar wrapped Yuder in a blanket, he spoke.

“Indeed, magic puts a larger strain compared to other powers, but this much is fine. It’s just a very basic heating spell.”

Anyone unable to conjure even a spark among the many mages would be envious to hear such a thing. Yuder was curious about the extent of this man’s skills, who mentioned a heating spell as if it was a trivial matter. As if noticing Yuder’s curiosity, Kishiar spoke as he draped a blanket over him.

“Curious about my skills?”

“If I say no, I’d be lying.”

At Yuder’s honest answer, Kishiar let out a gentle laugh.

“I am confident that I can compete with anyone in terms of theory and magic power control. But honestly, I haven’t learned many formal spells.”

“What does the number of learned spells have to do with skill if you’re good at magic power control?”

“Well, you’re right. I’ve limited it because if I learn too many spells, I might end up using them unconsciously.”

Kishiar gave a crisp answer and explained that he couldn't be evaluated on the same standards as other mages due to this reason. His words indicated that his capabilities exceeded the ordinary in every way.

"I don't know when I'll start working on removing the amplification circle, but I plan to do some warm-up exercises with small spells to awaken your senses. And heating up the heat-retaining pouch is a very good warm-up exercise."

It was a truly eloquent and cunning argument. Yuder, having no words to refute the man who subtly implied he would continue to use magic at his convenience, just closed his mouth.

"…"

"If you want to say you're uncomfortable, just get better. Then I won't have to do this, will I?"

"If it were that easy, I would've been healthy a long time ago…"

Kishiar spent most of the day assisting with research where the mages gathered, but in his spare time, he made a point to visit Yuder. He personally changed his bandages and checked his condition. Kishiar had also claimed to be busy with other work, so it was hard to even guess when he might take some time for himself.

"But we made some decent progress today. We confirmed that the monster's tongue causes resonance in contact with the amplification magic stone, so we're going to conduct further experiments based on that."

"Is that so?"

"I was wondering what we should do if they throw a fit about needing materials, but they figured out a substitute on their own."

Kishiar’s tone was always cold when talking about the mages. Before his aura could become any colder, Yuder changed the subject.

“I informed my comrades about the weaknesses of my abilities today.”

“Today? I see. What was their reaction?”

Unlike when he mentioned the mages, Kishiar’s voice became brighter. Yuder recalled their chatter around him and smiled faintly.

“…It wasn’t as bad as I expected.”

“Did you only talk about the weaknesses? Anything else?”

“I also briefly explained the limits of my abilities.”

“You mean you can’t exert the strength you demonstrated when defeating the giant monster more than once a day.”

“Yes.”

Kishiar had already heard as much from Yuder. Now that he had told his comrades the same, Yuder planned to disclose a slightly more advanced piece of information to him.

“However, there’s one more thing I haven’t told them yet.”

At this, Yuder’s hand, which was stroking the blanket, paused briefly. After a moment, Kishiar resumed speaking.

“One more thing?”

“Yes. I suppose you may have guessed from recent events, but I have very little power against monsters, and thus can’t use my power on items made from monster byproducts.”

This applied to ropes made from sinews, weapons made from ground teeth or bones, or poison made from mixing blood. While not commonly used due to the difficulty in processing, these items were not extremely rare either. After vaguely recalling memories from a previous life, Yuder added a sentence.

“I wanted you to be the only one aware of this, hence why I’m telling you now.”

Kishiar was silent for a while. As Yuder wondered about his expression hidden in the darkness, a low voice echoed in his ear.

“…Alright. I’ll keep it in mind since you trust me enough to tell me.”

He had clearly understood the implication behind Yuder’s words. Yuder nodded, feeling a slight relief.

Despite several protests, Kishiar ended up staying by Yuder’s side until his temperature returned to normal and he fell asleep. Both of them could palpably feel that the weight of the time they spent together was growing heavier compared to before.

Even being with someone could bring about such a myriad of emotions, a fact that still surprised Yuder every day, despite experiencing it constantly. He hoped that the mages of the Western Mage Union would find a good solution quickly, before he drowned in that enormous wave of feelings, or perhaps before the second dispatch arrived.

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“Within the Great Sarain Forest, the earth shook and mountains crumbled as a great upheaval occurred, and it is said that this was not caused by a natural disaster or monsters, but by human power.”

When this rumor first started to spread, people didn't believe it as fact. The Great Sarain Forest was not just anywhere. It was a vast labyrinth-like forest that had slowly grown over nearly a thousand years in the western part of the Empire. Many swordmasters and mages had tried to conquer it using their powers, but none of them could stop the growth of the forest. All humans could do there was merely build a few mountain cottages or pave small paths for trade routes and prevent the growing trees from consuming these efforts.

The Duke of Tain, whose base was in the western part of the Empire, thought it more credible to believe that the Duke of Peletta had become the owner of the Divine Sword than to believe such a far-fetched tale. Indeed, after the incident, the Duke of Peletta had been conspicuously absent, residing within the Cavalry.

However, not long after, when new rumors began to spread with renewed force, it became difficult for anyone to laugh it off as fabrication.

"Reliable testimonies are flooding in from the western border villages that throughout the night, monster cries and earthquakes continued from the direction of the Great Sarain Forest."

"After the incident, the surge in monster abnormalities abruptly ceased."

"The one who caused this upheaval was an Awakener, dispatched from the Cavalry to find and stop the cause of the monster outbreaks in the west."

"Moreover, around the same time, it was reported that numerous Sun God Priests in the west detected a massive divine power moving in the Great Sarain Forest…"

As rumors and testimonies continuously flowed from the west, spreading everywhere via all sorts of routes, many began to be

bewildered. And as if waiting for people's attention to gather, the Cavalry announced official news.

The news was enough to whack the back of the heads of those who had so far scoffed at the Cavalry, not paying it any mind.

"What is this all about? The ones dispatched first by the Cavalry are already in the west, and the Duke of Peletta, wielding the Divine Sword, is among them? And there are plans to dispatch a second group soon? Is this the so-called accurate information you've brought me?"

Angry, the Duke of Tain heaved a breath, raising his voice, causing his servants to tremble in prostration.

"Haven't I been told that the Duke of Peletta is still residing within the Cavalry? There has been no movement, and if this is true, what happens to my dignity?"

The fact that they had failed to properly monitor the movements of a power group that had infiltrated right into the middle of the Tain family, who had influence throughout the west, was a shameful enough matter to warrant ridicule.

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For quite a while, Duke Tain smoldered with fury, finally calming himself enough to speak with evident effort.

“No… it isn’t so. We cannot blindly trust their words. Everyone knows that His Majesty the Emperor has been plotting lately, lending strength to his brother. Undoubtedly, his schemes are involved in this too.”

The Duke immediately dispatched a message to Tainu, ordering them to verify whether the rumors circulating in the capital were true. He also summoned Theorado, the Commander of the Imperial Knights, who might know if Kishiar was truly absent from the Cavalry. However, the responses brought bad news.

The urgent letter from Baron Willhem of Tainu read, ‘I am not sure if the Cavalry is here, but it is true that a massive earthquake occurred in Great Sarain Forest. We are in touch with the people sent there, so please wait a little longer.’ And from Theorado, the Commander of the Imperial Knights, ‘Due to training schedules, I am unable to visit for a while. Please refrain from contacting me.’ Holding these two letters, Duke Tain was consumed by rage.

“This is unbelievable…”

He had assumed that if the Cavalry were to send people to the West, they would undoubtedly pass through the major western city, Tainu, and meet with Baron Willhem. That was why he entrusted Baron Willhem with their management, but the outcome was far from satisfactory.

If the Cavalry had indeed done something in Great Sarain Forest, it meant they ignored his orders and didn’t even stop by Tainu.

Moreover, what had Baron Willhem, whose duty it was to oversee the West, been doing while all of this unfolded?

‘In his previous letter, he said that they had sent mages and knights to Great Sarain Forest to protect the investment hub. If that’s true, how could he not know about the incident there?’

The answer was obvious. Baron Willhem was just pretending to obey him while neglecting his duties. Even if he could tolerate his cousin Theorado, who was always indifferent to family affairs, it was hard to forgive the Cavalry, Duke Peletta, and Baron Willhem, all who clearly ignored him.

‘Damn it. Leaving all those matters aside, I can’t even confirm what happened to the Western trade hubs I’ve been painstakingly building.’

It was too soon to expect returns on his investments in the South, but he had been hoping that once the hubs were completed in the West, they would generate wealth. The possibility of complications arising there as well gave him a sudden headache.

As he often did when irritated, Duke Tain decided to visit the upscale gambling house he frequented. So engrossed in his desire to forget his troubles, he didn’t notice the figures discreetly following him.

“Your Majesty. A courier from the West arrived at House Tain.”

Emperor Keilusa, who had been reviewing documents, stopped at the attendant’s distant report.

“I see… He must have heard the news. Any reaction?”

“He was furious, but for now, he seems to be behaving as usual.”

“Understood. Keep a close eye on him and report any unusual activity immediately to Duke Peletta and me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

After the attendant had withdrawn, the Emperor set down his pen and surveyed the clutter of tea cups scattered across his desk. Beside them, a basket filled with faintly glowing red stones. They were mediums infused with the power of the Red Stone, gifts from Kishiar. The Emperor picked up one of the stones, holding it in his hand, a fleeting hint of bitterness crossing his gaze.

“Foolish boy.”

Moments later, he could no longer suppress the burgeoning cough and dropped his writing instrument. Blood splattered over the hastily covered handkerchief.

“Your Majesty!”

The chief attendant, who had returned to the room, quickly supported him. The Emperor brushed his hand away, gasping heavily for a while. Noticing the blood staining his lips and the hollow, dark circles under his eyes, the elderly attendant’s face turned somber.

“Your Majesty…”

“Did I not tell you not to touch me.”

“How could I not, Your Majesty?” replied the attendant, though the Emperor ignored him, turning his head. He firmly refused all suggestions, whether to summon the royal physician or to contact the head court mage.

“I need none of that.”

“But you must at least receive a prescription to alleviate the pain. You haven’t slept for days.”

“Such things might alleviate the pain temporarily, but that’s all. I dislike drugs that dull the mind. I still have much to do. If you’re going to keep making a fuss, at least bring me some tea.”

There was only one type of tea the Emperor desired in moments like these. It was brewed from medicinal herbs personally grown and sent by the Empress. The Emperor put down his pen and removed his glasses to drink the tea brought by the attendant. For a fleeting moment, a hint of warmth returned to his pale complexion.

“What is the Empress doing today?”

“She went to tend to the garden after finishing her duties. She also wished to inform you that she would like to have dinner together tomorrow evening…”

“I see…”

The Emperor lowered his gaze without giving a definitive answer.

“And Katchian, is he still confined in the palace?”

“Yes.”

Though Katchian, the crown prince, had fully recovered from the physical wounds of the assassin’s attack, his mental state had not improved at all. Every day, he lashed out and broke objects, as if his previously wicked laughter had been but an illusion. The primary cause of his madness was the unbearable scar on his face.

“Duke Diarca must be quite worried.”

“Indeed, he seems to be. He’s looking everywhere for a way to cure the madness.”

“His coveted position is now precarious. His impatience must be unbearable. It would be best if they focus on that until this matter is settled.”

The Emperor, who mercilessly mocked Duke Diarca without a hint of humor, coughed a few more times.

“I thought Herne would have something to say by now… but it seems they’re still out of sorts.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. If there was a problem with the Herne family, the Empress would have already chided them. Please, do not worry.”

The Emperor faintly smiled at the mention of the Empress, but it quickly faded. A deep darkness washed over his sickly countenance.

“I still have a long journey ahead… yet my life is fading too quickly.”

“Your Majesty…”

The bitter confession filled with regret brought a gloomy look to the attendant’s eyes, who knew the meaning behind the Emperor’s words.

“Do not worry. I have no intention of dying so meekly.”

Sighing, the Emperor put on his glasses again. At that moment, the attendant noticed a royal courier bird circling outside the window.

“Your Majesty, a new bird has been sent from the west.”

“From Duke Peletta?”

“Yes.”

He immediately read the letter brought by the royal courier bird. As he perused the rather short letter, the eyes hidden behind his

spectacles repeatedly widened and then narrowed.

“…I wondered why they are rushing to recall the second detachment from the Cavalry.”

“Your Majesty, has something happened?”

Nothing had happened to Kishiar. If anything, the change concerned his newly appointed assistant. The Emperor recalled the memory of the time when Kishiar first reported the enormous incident that occurred in Great Sarain Forest via a letter.

When he first read the tale of a Cavalry member who single-handedly fought a colossal monster that could have potentially swept over not just Great Sarain Forest but possibly the whole western region, and eventually emerged victorious after collapsing a hill, the Emperor also doubted the sincerity of the story. He was well aware that his brother would not lie about such matters, but the tale was beyond imagination.

The Cavalry member had suffered severe injuries for killing the monster. And Kishiar was in a state of staying in Great Sarain Forest, even altering his original plans, in order to find a way to heal him.

The Emperor conjured up an image of his strikingly handsome brother. Kishiar might appear to live more spontaneously than anyone on the surface, but he was in fact more meticulous than anyone else. Although the letter cited various reasons such as not just for healing his assistant and increasing tasks to investigate, the Emperor’s gaze lingered only on the place where Kishiar had written the assistant’s name. It was something akin to a blood-bonded intuition.

‘The assistant… Yuder Aile. Who was he?’

He had previously granted last names to a few Cavalry members who followed Kishiar. If he had come along then, he must have seen

his face, but his memory was so faint that he couldn't quite recall.

The Emperor folded Kishiar's letter. He felt slightly worried, but also found it intriguing.

'It's strange. He had never shown such haste even for his treasured Nathan Zuckerman, or the Peletta Knights whom he raised himself…'

Kishiar asked the Emperor for a few things in the letter. As brothers engaged in a grand plan, they were not hard requests to grant.

"Tell those in the West to spread the word faster. It is necessary to recognize the Peletta Duke as the new owner of the Divine Sword as soon as possible. Also, make contact with the Pearl Tower."

"The Pearl Tower… you say?"

"Yes. There seem to be a few criminals we sent to them from Great Sarain Forest, and it appears the Peletta Duke does not want to let them off with a light punishment."

After hearing a few more directives, the chief attendant politely excused himself. The Emperor began to waver again, staring out the window. The crimson sunset staining the western sky resembled blood.

That blood would soon pour evenly over the heads of those who seized the West. At least until that day, he could not die.

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Chapter 304

The Empire's attention was focused on the Cavalry, but ironically, the Cavalry building within the Imperial Knight's base was quieter than ever. This was because, after the departure of the second dispatched unit towards the west, there was hardly any personnel left behind.

Thanks to this, people other than the unit members who were working there finally had the opportunity to relax. Among them were two Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, Gayle and Doyle.

"There's no cleaning or dishwashing today. Can we really slack off like this?"

"Seems so. The kindly old man said if you want to eat, eat. If you want to exercise, go to the back and do it."

Of the three Deputy Commanders, Steiber, the only one left to guard the Cavalry, was seen by the brothers as nothing more than a good-hearted old man. In fact, apart from Steiber, everyone they met here seemed excessively kind to them.

"I used to think I'd just die if I got caught while working in a noble's house… but now, it feels like I could live like this for the rest of my life."

"Same here."

The Cavalry members were truly strange. They didn't torture Gayle and Doyle, nor did they make their lives miserable or force them to work. Occasionally, they would ask questions, but they never insisted on an answer if they refused to give one. When they complained about feeling suffocated in their room, they were allowed

to roam within the premises. They even felt awkward when the brothers offered to help with chores.

Although they couldn't understand why they were still being kept here, the initial fear and aversion they felt upon capture had long since melted away. The brothers ate to their hearts' content and comfortably lay in the empty garden, looking up at the sky. They didn't know about the outside world, but their hearts were more peaceful than ever.

"Doyle, should we ask if we can stay here and help out when they come back this time?"

"Do you think they'd let us? Considering where we come from… And the Sage might be looking for us, do you think we should stay here anyway?"

Gayle's face darkened at the mention of the Sage. However, he soon mumbled, "They probably think we're dead and have forgotten about us by now. We're not betraying anyone by staying here a little longer."

"You know, when I was there, constantly being told to hold a sword and train was too much for me. You also hated seeing blood."

"…"

"Let's just close our eyes, pretend we never met the Sage, and earn some money here. You saw it too, right? The Awakeners who were rescued from the noble's house and brought here with us, they earn money working here too. I discreetly asked how much they make, and apparently, it's enough to buy a farm in a few years."

"Really?!"

"They all already know we don't know much about the Sage or the noble. They might agree if we ask."

Their lifelong dream was to own their own flock and house. Just as their resolve began to waver, a Cavalry member called out to them loudly.

“Hey, over there! Can you come over here and give me a hand?”

Originally, only a select few could converse with the brothers, such as the three Deputy Commanders and the assistant. But now, most of them were absent, and Steiber, the lone Deputy Commander, wasn’t there. The ordinary member who had called out to them seemed to regard the brothers as just regular workers around the base.

“Uh… what should we do?”

“What do you mean ‘what?’ They asked for help. If we help nicely, won’t they put in a good word for us when those guys come?”

The brothers nervously turned towards the Cavalry member. The member, clad in a black uniform, hurriedly took out several letters from his pocket and handed them to them.

“Could you deliver these for me? I’ll pay you for the errand. I have something to do right now, so I can’t go out myself.”

“Uh… um…”

“In a little while, the cart that tours the Imperial Knights base every day will come to the front gate, so you just have to give them to the cart driver then. I’ll count on you!”

In a blink, the brothers were left holding a few letters and coins. They were initially startled, but it seemed fine since they only had to go to the front gate of the Imperial Knights base. With uneasy faces, the brothers headed towards the main gate. As the member had said, it wasn’t long before they saw a cart approaching from afar.

“H-here! Stop!”

When Gayle waved his hand and yelled, the cart slowly reduced its speed and came to a halt in front of them. The brothers tried to awkwardly hand over the letters to the cart driver who was coming down from the cart, but after a moment, they froze in shock. The face of the cart driver, who had taken off his hat, was an unexpected person to see here.

“N-Nahan?!”

“Quiet.”

Nahan, dressed as a cart driver, clicked his tongue and signaled them to be quiet. Startled, the brothers closed their mouths.

“Nahan. How on earth… didn’t you abandon us?”

“That’s not something you should say to the person who came to rescue you.”

His cold, gray eyes, hard as steel, scanned their faces.

“You two look well. It seems you’ve been doing quite well here.”

Their faces turned red instantly. They thought that Nahan was mocking them for comfortably betraying them without any torture.

“It’s all because of you! Because you abandoned us, we had to be here…!”

“Ah, no. It’s all my fault.”

Another foreign young man stuck his face out from the cart and interrupted with a face full of guilt. Nahan, despite his dislike, saw the brothers flinch simultaneously with surprise. Their remaining affection for the young man left them at a loss.

“Hosanna! You’re here too? What on earth are we going to…!”

“I’m really sorry. I made a thoughtless request to you and you had to go through this… but it will be okay now……”

“Let’s take the idle chat outside.”

Nahan interrupted sharply, scanning the surroundings.

“It took me a few days to infiltrate undetected and call you two out. Come on, we have to go back.”

“Y-you called us? When? We were asked to deliver a letter…”

Nahan chuckled.

“What do you think was the reason for someone to conveniently appear at this time and ask you two to deliver a letter?”

The brothers’ mouths fell open. Nahan scowled at their faces.

“Get on the cart quickly. The surroundings are all protected by ancient magic, so Hosanna can’t use his teleportation ability, and it’s difficult for me to use illusion abilities.”

“But…”

The brothers looked at each other with trembling eyes. The rescue opportunity they had only dreamed of had finally come, but they couldn’t feel entirely happy. Seemingly reading their moment of hesitation, Nahan’s eyes slightly narrowed.

“By any chance, don’t you want to leave?”

“No. No.”

Doyle reflexively denied it. However, Gayle didn’t open his mouth.

“Gayle?”

Hosanna, who stood beside Nahan, opened his mouth anxiously. Gayle clenched his fist tightly and glared at Nahan. The scales of the fierce debate in his mind had just tipped a bit more to one side.

“I don’t want to go.”

“Gayle! Why would you say such a thing? Have you been brainwashed? Or…”

“Nobody did that!”

Gayle roared out loud.

“Nobody forced anything on us, and we didn’t say anything. We didn’t betray you or anything like that. Just assume we’re dead and leave us. It will remain a secret that you were here.”

The surroundings were suddenly enveloped in an icy silence. Gayle looked at Nahan with a slight fear, but he didn’t relax his clenched fist. As Hosanna, pale and taut, looked up at Nahan, a chilly voice flowed from his lips.

“Well… If that’s what our brothers want, I’m inclined to agree. But I’m not sure if the Sage would see it the same way.”

“I’m sorry to the Sage… but I’m sure they will understand.”

“Really?”

His gaze moved past Gayle and Doyle towards the Cavalry building.

“Do you know that a large group of Cavalry appeared near our western outpost? Our brothers and sisters, who didn’t even realize they were Cavalry, were really surprised to find out late. I heard they even discovered our base.”

“Wh, what…?”

Startled by the sudden news, Nahan spat out one more sentence to the disoriented brothers.

“You once stayed at that outpost too. Can you truly be sure that you didn’t reveal our western outpost to them?”

“We didn’t say a word! So, did the brothers at that outpost get killed by the Cavalry?”

“No. But they’ll probably move soon. It’s an outpost that was built with great effort, so many of our brothers and sisters will be upset.”

The brothers were momentarily speechless.

“And I’m sorry, but I already reported to the Sage that you might be alive before coming here. I don’t know what will happen if I report that you refuse to return.”

“Nahan, you…”

Nahan exhaled, looking at the pale brothers, and opened his mouth with a voice cold yet soft.

“It’s not like I wanted to do this. I naturally thought the brothers would return, and I had to prepare in case Hosanna and I were in danger, so I just reported. However… If you need time to think, I can help.”

Looking at the two pairs of simple eyes asking, “How?” Nahan quietly answered.

“I won’t report that you refused to return for now. Until we come back next time, you think well about whether the brothers here are really good people who leave you be. If your opinion hasn’t changed the next time we come, we will do as you wish.”

“…How can we trust you.”

“I always keep my word to our brothers and sisters. You know that, right?”

Only then did the brothers believe what Nahan said. They heaved a deep sigh as they watched the departing cart as if nothing had happened. The emergence of a secret was immensely uncomfortable.

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Chapter 305

“Sir, I have a question… if I may.”

Nahan turned to the worried voice emanating from the carriage, his hand still holding the reins of the horses.

“What is it?”

“If Gayle and Doyle decide to stay here next time, will you really… let them do as they wish?”

“I made a promise, so I guess I have to.”

“But…”

The words of Hosanna, seemingly about to continue, did not follow for quite a while. Nahan exhaled softly through his nose, gripping the reins a bit tighter, and casually opened his mouth.

“If you have something to say, say it directly, Hosanna. You think I’ve left them for another reason, don’t you?”

“No, that’s not what I… “

“Actually, you’re right. I want Gayle and Doyle to learn more about the Cavalry.”

For a moment, the faint sound of Hosanna swallowing his breath could be heard.

“You don’t mean to… oppose the Cavalry, do you?”

“No. Even if they belong somewhere else, the Cavalry members are still our brothers and sisters. There’s no reason to oppose them.

But that also doesn’t mean we should continue to ignore them completely.”

Nahan’s pale, lifeless eyes scanned over the Imperial Knights passing by in the distance. None of them seemed to find this ordinary wagon unusual, but in Nahan’s gaze, a limitless cold emotion filled him as he watched them.

“They’re tracking us, so we need to know about them too.”

“But the Sage said…”

“To eliminate internal threats, sometimes you have to deceive even your own hands and feet.”

His emotionless voice was so cold that Hosanna involuntarily shivered.

“I’m just… I’ve heard a lot of people saying that you’re not listening to the Sage these days… and I’m worried about what might happen if this issue is added to that… “

“Hosanna.”

At the low call, Hosanna’s body flinched.

“My belief has not changed since the day the Star of Nagran was created. Whatever I do, it’s for all of us, not just for me. So, if it seems like someone among us has let go first, it would be the Sage, not me.”

The rolling carriage was then enveloped in silence for a long time.

“So… after your trip to the West, are you planning to go back to Gayle and Doyle?”

“Yes.”

Nahan responded briefly as he slipped out onto a side road where the knights were coming and going.

“Honestly, I don’t think there’s a need for such a divide over the issue of moving our base, but if we don’t resolve this problem now, all of our brothers and sisters will continue to be confused.”

“If the Cavalry is there, the Cavalry member we met before might be there too… please be careful.”

Nahan immediately recognized the Cavalry member that Hosanna was talking about. A surge of interest bubbled up as he recalled the black-haired Cavalry member whom they had encountered by rare chance several times.

“…Alright.”

–-

“Yuder. Did you hear? It seems the mages have finally found something that might heal you.”

Yuder turned his head towards Kanna who had entered through the door while he was eating breakfast in bed.

“They… found something?”

“The Commander instructed Gakane, Hinn, and Finn to investigate the Magic Spring Ruins. As soon as they finish checking the surroundings, they’ll start preparing the magic.”

Yuder immediately put down his spoon. Lusan, the Priest who had been helping him eat, exclaimed in an excited voice, “That’s great news!”

“They really managed to do it, didn’t they? Disassembled that enormous monster carcass and dragged it all the way here, and after

all sorts of struggles.”

“That’s what I’m saying. I’m astonished myself. We’ve finally found the real answer this time, haven’t we?”

Kanna and Lusan chattered away happily for quite a while. Yuder heard their conversation, but hardly any of it really registered in his mind.

‘Did they really…find a way to remove the traces of the amplification circle?’

Just as Kishiar had hoped for, they had indeed found the answer before the second dispatch team arrived. His determination was remarkable, yet it didn’t seem quite real.

Lost in his tangled, trailing thoughts, he realized a bit later than usual that the two had left and someone else had entered.

“What are you thinking about so deeply?”

“…”

With a cool, pleasant scent, Kishiar sat down next to him, reaching out to gently touch his forehead and cheek, feeling for a fever as he often did.

“You’re burning up. We need to put a damp cloth on you.”

“Commander, is it true that you’ve found a way to remove the traces of the amplification circle?”

As he asked his question, he sensed a pause in Kishiar’s movement beside him.

“Did you hear it from Kanna? Yes, it’s true.”

A cold, wet towel was placed on Yuder’s forehead.

“We plan to execute the dispelling magic by tomorrow evening if all goes well.”

“What should I do then?”

“What should you do?”

Kishiar, holding the wet towel, let out a short laugh as though he’d said something amusing.

“Of course, the subject himself doesn’t need to do anything. The mages and I will take care of the preparations.”

“I’ve also heard that you’ve ordered the inspection of the Magic Spring Ruins…”

“From the time we’ve spent examining the spring, we’ve concluded that using its magic power wouldn’t pose much risk. I intend to borrow from it, instead of using my own magic power.”

After a moment of hesitation, Yuder quietly opened his mouth.

“The mages… they probably wouldn’t like that.”

“If they don’t like it, what can they do? As long as the person I care about likes me, that’s enough.”

Everything else seemed superfluous. He felt an unusually warm and bright emotion emanating from the man who, muttering to himself, took Yuder’s hand. He must have been pleased, having finally found an answer, even if it might not seem like it.

“And besides, this was originally an idea proposed by the Western Mage Union’s leader. The only change is that the caster has switched from him to me, so they shouldn’t have any complaints.”

“That’s a relief then…”

If Kishiar wasn’t directly using his own magic power, it shouldn’t put too much strain on his body. The thought of tampering with the Magic Spring was a bit worrying, but he supposed that would be considered by those who were more knowledgeable about magic, so he decided not to worry too much.

It was as if Kishiar had noticed Yuder’s thoughts because he mentioned something similar.

“From their perspective, this situation isn’t necessarily all bad. The casting of this magic might even provide an opportunity to understand the growth power of the Great Sarain Forest that has long been kept secret.”

What did the dispelling magic have to do with the growth power of the Great Sarain Forest? After a moment of silence, a possible answer popped into Yuder’s mind.

“Do you believe there’s a connection… between the growth power of the Great Sarain Forest and the Magic Spring?”

“It’s a hypothesis for now, but yes.”

As the elegant voice explained a few things that it had discovered while observing the Magic Spring, Yuder momentarily lost his senses. He thought he only drifted off like this when he saw Kishiar’s face directly, but nowadays he often found himself dazed even just by hearing his voice.

His entire senses were immediately drawn towards Kishiar with only the voice coming through his ears and the touch on his skin. The bias was so extreme that it was hard to notice anything else.

“…and also the fact that the strange crack no longer appears, I think maybe when the magic power gathered inside the spring fails to maintain a certain balance, problems like these occur.”

His consciousness, which was floating intoxicated by the warm, pleasant voice, barely regained its footing at the mention of the crack.

“A crack… are you saying?”

“Yes. Didn’t that crack look almost identical in shape to the ones that appear when monsters spawn? Of course, it was a little bigger and remained in place for a longer time, though.”

“Yes.”

“Old scriptures including Scripture of the Sun God often refer to the crack that appears when monsters spawn as a bad omen indicating the balance of the world is being disrupted. Magic is also one of the forces that maintain the balance of the world, so if it is disrupted, it could very well cause problems.”

Balance of the world. Yuder mulled over the words. He thought he heard something similar when he was looking for a solution to the disaster in his previous life.

‘Doomsday theorists who said that the reason for the constant appearances of great disasters and monsters is because the balance of the world has crumbled, and that eventually everyone will be destroyed, they often said things like that.’

“The spell I will cast tomorrow requires an immense amount of magic power. If we observe how the spring and the Great Sarain Forest change after draining a large amount of magic power that has been accumulating and amplifying for a long time, we may understand their relationship better. It’s a good opportunity to closely observe the flow and changes of magic power.”

“I see.”

“It’s a phenomenon that’s almost impossible to observe now, but if you look at the journals of old mages, they say that in places where magic power of enormous scale occurred, sometimes changes occurred in the surrounding natural environment over a period of days, or even years. Either all the flowers and grasses would wither and die and not grow back, or the opposite would occur, or the seasons would change.”

So, it seemed that Kishiar wanted to say that a similar phenomenon might have occurred between the Magic Spring and the Great Sarain Forest. Yuder let out a small breath as he listened to Kishiar’s voice, who seemed to be quite intrigued by the story.

“…I’m glad to see you’re in good spirits.”

“Hmm? Was it that obvious?”

Instead of answering, Yuder nodded slightly. He heard Kishiar faintly laugh.

“Well, well. Even if you can’t see, I can’t deceive my assistant. As a reward… yes. Shall we go for a walk?”

Yuder paused at the sudden suggestion. It would be a lie if he said he didn’t feel stuffy from being in the room all the time, but he wasn’t sure whether it would be alright to go out considering his fever and weak physical state.

“Considering my condition… wouldn’t it be difficult?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

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Chapter 306

“Don’t worry about that.”

The confident tone in his voice evoked a strange, uneasy premonition.

“If I carry you, there won’t be any issues.”

The foreboding quickly morphed into reality. Yuder dismissed the suggestion immediately, without a hint of hesitation.

“I don’t want to.”

“What if I carry you on my back instead?”

“Whether you carry me or not is not the issue. I don’t want to go out that badly.”

“You make it sound so grave. There’s no simpler way to take a walk together. You can’t possibly dislike it because I suggested carrying you?”

“What are you saying…?”

Just as he was about to refute the unfounded certainty, he hesitated when he recalled the incidents that had occurred up until then. Starting from the moment Yuder clung onto him when his second gender manifested, until just yesterday when he compliantly allowed himself to be moved for meals, he tried to push these memories from his mind. Recollections of him taking the initiative to hold onto the other party also subtly emerged. It took a bit of time to come up with another reason as he tried to think beyond these.

“Inside and outside…aren’t they different?”

“Different? What’s different?”

His blood boiled slightly at the calm voice, feigning ignorance despite understanding his meaning. Yuder decided to drop the indirect expressions and speak directly.

“If we behave that way outside, we can’t avoid drawing attention. Rumors will inevitably spread. I thought, Commander, you had always taken that into consideration…”

Yuder knew all too well what the consequences would be when such unnecessary rumors spread; he had seen it happen countless times in his previous life. Therefore, in this life, he strived not to let their relationship appear as anything more than that of a normal Commander and his assistant, seen by the public.

He did eventually succumb to the massive urges toward Kishiar, but that didn’t mean he wanted to repeat the foolishness of his past. The multitude of emotions he felt for Kishiar and the potential dangers of their current situation were definitely separate issues.

He assumed Kishiar would be well aware of this too. Yet here he was, brazenly suggesting a public stroll while carrying him, fully aware others might see.

‘Surely, he hasn’t forgotten that we’re not in our Cavalry base but in the heart of the Western Mage Union due to his overly joyous mood.’

The Cavalry members might not blink an eye at Kishiar’s peculiar nature, as they were already well accustomed to it, but the mages were different. Memories from the past flooded Yuder’s mind in an instant.

“Unnecessary rumors, huh… I’m surprised you think that way.”

“What’s so surprising?”

“I thought my assistant would be the least bothered about my status or name in this world. It’s surprising to find out that’s not the case.”

Yuder was momentarily at a loss for words.

“…If I’ve seemed disrespectful until now, I apologize… but of course I know who you are, Commander, and I care more than anyone else.”

“See? That’s exactly the kind of response. If you were genuinely wary of me, you would never be able to answer like that.”

For the second time, Yuder was speechless. Arguments formed and fell apart in his mind over and over again.

“…I believe anyone else could have given the same response.”

“Is that so? If I’d said the same thing to Gakane Bolunwald or Kanna Wand, I don’t think I would have received a similar answer.”

“What are you trying to say, then? While I may not understand the necessity of going outside, my belief that there’s no need for you, Commander, to carry me hasn’t changed.”

“Calm yourself. You’re feverish.”

After a sharp retort, he took a small breath, and a cool hand touched his cheek along with a calm voice. Yuder regretted that the pleasant atmosphere of moments ago had once again descended into silence.

Just as he hesitated and was about to speak, Kishiar began first.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to unsettle you. Perhaps I’ve upset you unnecessarily out of greed, thinking you were okay enough for this.”

“…”

“But there’s one thing I want to say.”

After his fading words were cut off, the sound of Kishiar taking a slow breath could be heard.

“I don’t find being with you even slightly disgraceful.”

Suddenly, a sharp pain was felt inside Yuder’s chest. The man who held his hand, seemingly to confirm that Yuder was still listening to him, continued speaking slowly.

“Rather, the opposite might be true. The scandalous rumor that the Duke of Peletta, who usually enjoys vulgarities, is trying to block the path of a promising young talent could circulate. And the Emperor, unable to bear it, could even give me a warning. That kind of outcome might even have a higher probability.”

“What…nonsense are you speaking of?”

“It’s not nonsense. You probably don’t know since you’ve been lying down here the whole time, but stories of an amazing awakener who has shaken the entire Great Sarain Forest are currently spreading far and wide across the Empire.”

There were faint laughter and unfamiliar emotions in his voice as he whispered that once this matter was over and they returned, a crowd of people, incomparable to before, would try to capture Yuder.

“Think about it. An unprecedented talent who also shines brightly with young and vibrant beauty is stuck under the Duke of Peletta. Even the Emperor would find it a pitiful story to just leave it be, thinking that such a person, who he himself would want to reward, is stuck in such a place. So, the story I just mentioned is also quite possible.”

Yuder shook his head. In his previous life, he had caused enough trouble to destroy and recreate many western landscapes using his

power, but no one came to recruit him. Of course, the time and outcome of the incident now were much different from then, but that didn't mean Yuder Aile's popularity would suddenly skyrocket.

And even setting aside the other fabricated parts of Kishiar's story, he had no intention of responding to whoever might try to recruit him. So all of this was meaningless from the beginning.

"That story has nothing to do with me. And, please don't speak of yourself in such a way…"

Whenever Kishiar belittled himself, he couldn't help but feel nauseous, just like before. Looking at Kishiar's tightly closed lips that smiled stubbornly, his voice was serious a moment later.

"Yuder. When all this is over and we return from the West, I plan to formally introduce you to the Emperor and Empress."

His heart pounded alarmingly for the second time, uncontrollably. A stronger force than before was put into the large hand that held Yuder's.

"What do you think I'll introduce you as?"

"…"

The assistant to the Cavalry Commander. A 20-year-old commoner Awakener.

There could be no other answer, yet Kishiar's words sounded as if there indeed was an alternative. He pulled Yuder's hand, briefly placing his lips on the fingers he held.

Startled by the heat, akin to being branded with a hot iron, Yuder stiffened. Kishiar looked at him, whispering with a conviction firmer than ever.

“You once said you could forever remain my cherished and adorable assistant and subordinate, if that’s what I wished… But are you aware? The prerequisite for that statement.”

“If you wish so.” A sigh laden with deep longing escaped from the man’s lips, uttering these words.

“My heart is already here. It was taken away so irresistibly, I have no method of retrieval - and even if I did, I wouldn’t want to. …But that doesn’t mean you should naturally provide the same response.”

“…”

“If you are willing to accept me beyond that, the story can change drastically. If I could get that worthwhile answer, no matter how long I have to wait, it wouldn’t be in vain.”

If you were to sum up his words with ordinary terms, the closest might be a proposal. Kishiar, who had given a clear answer that couldn’t be ignored or perceived differently, exhaled a thin breath. The weight of the warmth he offered was familiar. He was certainly recalling the moment when he thought Yuder had died in his arms. Such a certainty sunk in for no apparent reason.

Yuder clenched his invisible eyes shut. As his heart warmed, a tremendous churning stirred in his belly. Despite several deep breaths, the pain did not abate.

When Yuder said nothing, the hand that had been stroking his cheek fell away. Feeling the signs of him letting go of his hand and standing up, Yuder was engulfed in a chill coldness. His body was hot from fever, but for some reason, it felt cold inside. An intense pain and urge that couldn’t be explained kept shaking his head.

He bit his lip as he heard the door opening.

“…Tonight.”

At that moment, the footsteps halted abruptly. Yuder strained to find his voice.

“When the sun sets, and the moon rises… then, it will be fine.”

“…”

“You don’t have to come if you’re tired…”

“…As if.”

The quiet, yet passionate response came back.

“So when the sun sets and the moon rises, it’s okay to take a walk with me?”

“…Yes.”

“Then I guess I must earnestly wish for the sun to hurry and cross to the west today.”

With a bright laughter, the door closed. Yuder remained motionless for quite a while, pondering what response he had blurted out.

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Chapter 307

The night that Yuder wished wouldn’t come arrived all too quickly. As Gakane, who had tended to him one last time, bid him a good night’s rest and left, Yuder let out a deep sigh.

In the meantime, he had inquired amongst the others and surprisingly found out that a portion of what Kishiar had said was indeed true. The speed at which the rumors about Yuder killing Pethuamet had spread seemed to have taken the other members by surprise too.

‘We only heard information, we don’t know how or what rumors spread. But… the mood among the mages seems to have changed from before.’

With a mutter about how surprising it might be once he was fully healed, Gakane left, making Yuder wish all the more for the success of the magic casting for removing the traces if the amplification circle that would happen the next day.

‘Having been bedridden much longer than expected… it would be nice to be able to move about, even just a little.’

At first, he found it unbearable to just lie there without doing anything, but now, thanks to his colleagues who took turns keeping him company, spending the day eating and sleeping didn’t feel like sitting on a bed of needles.

Even though he was almost oblivious to what was happening outside, the fact that he could feel so stable was undoubtedly because they, and Kishiar, had taken such good care of Yuder.

When he thought of Kishiar, his mind naturally drifted to the conversation they had earlier that day. In fact, what Kishiar had said

lingered in Yuder’s mind even while he was with the others. It was a conversation that had been shocking enough to do so.

Kishiar had said that being with Yuder was not a disgrace to him.

As he revisited those resolute words, he once again felt a tingling sensation deep within his chest.

What could he call this feeling? Shock? Or pain?

He hadn’t expected Kishiar, of all people, who had been involved in the disgrace in his previous life, to say such things.

‘The Kishiar of my past life… He used to tell me not to fight every time I got into trouble because of that disgrace, but he never mentioned his personal thoughts.’

Yuder had never wished to hear what Kishiar had to say. He assumed it would naturally upset him, and he did not want to mention the distasteful rumor, even inadvertently.

But what was the reality?

Did the Kishiar of his past life consider that rumor, and the truth behind it, an unpleasant disgrace?

‘…I can’t know.’

He can’t know now. If it were before, he would have stopped thinking at this point.

However, now he couldn’t just stop there, feeling a throbbing pain as if holes had been punched somewhere inside of him. Yuder thought about the Kishiar from his past life that he saw through dreams and memories that he knew yet didn’t know.

The man who had hidden himself behind a cold and thick wall until his last day. The man from a distant past who knew the

emotions Yuder felt for him but disappeared without giving a proper explanation.

However, he couldn’t deny that the things he was forcibly taught by that man enabled Yuder Aile to survive this far.

‘I thought he was a meaningless opponent… but perhaps that wasn’t the case. If so, what did he think of me?’

What did the Kishiar of the past really think of Yuder Aile?

His successor, a casual bedmate, or perhaps there was something more?

He felt incredibly strange. It was the first time he had ever entertained such a thought. He had never really cared about how Kishiar viewed or thought of him, neither in this life nor in the previous one.

‘There were many others aside from Kishiar who treated me differently in my past and current life… Why does he alone feel so peculiar?’

The result could vary tremendously depending on the type of relationship formed and the shared experiences with the same person. Gakane, the Eldore siblings, Enon, and his other comrades in the Cavalry were living proof of that.

So, he thought that the transparent and honest emotions Kishiar was currently showing towards Yuder could also be understood as part of such changes. Yet, something felt different, a feeling that wouldn’t leave his heart.

“…Is he already asleep?”

At that moment, there was a rattle near the window, followed by the sound of a cool breeze and a familiar presence entering the

room. Yuder reflexively turned his head, a sudden sense of bewilderment welling up.

“Why are you entering through there instead of the door…?”

“I needed to come and go unnoticed, so I climbed through the window.”

Yuder answered, his voice trembling slightly.

“I was told… this is the second floor.”

“Don’t worry. When I was in the palace, I managed to navigate even the fifth floor just fine. Nobody knew I was going in and out. Of course, it’ll be the same today.”

For a moment, Yuder recalled how his past self had often climbed through the office window even after retiring. Despite evading all sorts of surveillance and infiltrating successfully, it seemed he had been accustomed to such activities from the start.

Thinking of the man, who could portray a royal elegance better than anyone when he wished, shamelessly climbing through windows, stirred complicated feelings in Yuder.

“Please don’t do anything dangerous. You might get hurt.”

“I wish you’d express such concern for yourself a bit more. Now, are you ready to go?”

With a playful voice, the presence moved closer. The man who had confirmed Yuder’s temperature had gone down, and that he was dressed, seemed to ponder something for a moment, then placed a thin, long blanket over Yuder’s shoulders.

“Good. It was wise to bring a blanket. It’s a chilly night, so this will help. Now……”

Hands supporting Yuder's legs and back lightly lifted him into an embrace. Yuder tensed, suddenly enveloped in Kishiar's scent.

"There's no need to be tense. I'll use my ability for a moment when we leave, so don't be surprised."

With confident strides, Kishiar began moving towards an unknown destination, then, without hesitation, he stretched out and jumped down. Yuder felt a faint energy lightly wrapping around his body.

'Is this… the power of an Awakener?'

What Yuder had believed to be Kishiar's power until now was a typical trait of a Shin Division member, an ability that strengthened the physical body. However, experiencing that power directly for the first time, it felt strangely different from what he had previously understood.

A strengthening ability should only affect the body. But Kishiar's energy was not only on his body but also moving in a certain direction.

'Moving the energy towards the ground, as if… pushing away…?'

Just as he got to that thought, their slowly descending bodies gently touched the ground.

"I tried to descend as slowly as possible, were you scared of the fall?"

"…Just now, what exactly did you do?"

"Huh?"

"You used the power of an Awakener that you possess, didn't you?"

“That’s right.”

Just as Yuder was about to say more, Kishiar, making a soft hushing noise, began to move, mumbling quietly.

“Let’s find a place without people to talk. After all, this is a walk for just the two of us.”

Unable to see, Yuder didn’t know where they were going, but Kishiar moved without the slightest hesitation. Judging by the sound of trees in the great forest rustling in the wind close by, they seemed to have ventured deep into the forest.

“We’re on the way to the Magic Spring. We’ll be climbing up into the trees soon.”

The man, kindly informing Yuder of their direction to prevent his curiosity, did just as he had said a moment later, leaping high into the air. Like when he fell from the bedroom, an Awakener’s energy enveloped Yuder, and, feeling as though he was being pulled upwards by something, he managed to reach a great height.

“Alright, we’re here.”

“…Was the top of the tree our destination?”

“I climbed up earlier, and this is the best spot to see the moon. Can you feel it?”

Yuder shook his head. No matter how bright the moonlight, he could not see it with his eyes covered by bandages. Unlike sunlight, he couldn’t feel its warmth, so he figured it must be nothing special.

Sitting on top of the tree, Kishiar took Yuder in his arms. He was so careful in wrapping his arm around Yuder’s shoulder, it made his body instinctively shiver.

“It’s a shame. The new moon is out tonight, and it’s so bright with no clouds. Just like in daylight, I could see your face clearly.”

His face, his hair, Kishiar murmured slowly, his voice uncomfortably close. Yuder, feeling a chill sensation inside his ears, slightly turned his head away to avoid it. But, being in Kishiar’s arms, there was no escaping it.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“…Yes.”

“Right now, we’re above a forest of trees that move like the sea beneath our feet. Every time the wind blows, the green forest sways all at once to one side, then rolls back, much like waves. Have you ever seen the sea?”

Yuder fell silent for a moment. He had seen the sea in his previous life, but not yet in this one. Not knowing how to respond, he simply closed his mouth. Fortunately, Kishiar didn’t press for an answer, and his voice continued.

“The sea is beautiful during the day, but it’s even more beautiful at night. As the sun sets, the boats that have been fishing all day start returning home one by one. Above these boats, countless birds follow along, dancing.”

The sea that remained in Yuder’s memory was just the sea itself with its rolling waves, he didn’t have any impressive recollections of the people living there or the sight of boats. But as he listened to Kishiar, the scene he was describing began to take shape in the black darkness.

“You must have seen the sea quite often.”

“Isn’t Peletta located by the sea?”

A soft laugh brushed past his ear.

“From the top of the castle, you can see the black cliffs and the sea spread out below every day.”

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Yuder was startled and, at the same time, felt a bitter taste at the unexpected fact that the sea described by Kishiar was indeed the likeness of Peletta. The Peletta that remained in his memory was far from such beauty.

“At first, I thought it was a desolate place, incredibly so. I had no enthusiasm because it was not a land I willingly went to. However, once I changed my attitude, I realized there was no sea as magnificent in the world. The truth is… nothing had changed.”

Nothing had changed, yet the sea was desolate at one point, and at another, it was beautiful.

He had said he couldn’t forget the landscape he saw then. Yuder painted in the darkness the rough sea below the black cliffs that Kishiar had softly described, a small fishing boat, and a flock of birds following the boat. He couldn’t tell how beautiful it was just from the vague image he summoned in his head, but it was strange that he felt like he could understand how it appeared and felt when he heard it from Kishiar’s mouth.

What kind of feelings did Kishiar have as he looked at the sea in those times?

Yuder couldn’t even guess how someone who had become the Duke of Peletta unwillingly would have felt there.

“I still feel similar to that time.”

Towards Yuder, who was vaguely trying to imagine Kishiar looking down at the sea from the castle, came a soft voice like a breeze grazing his cheeks.

“I never thought the meaningless Great Sarain Forest would feel as beautiful as it does now. How about you, my assistant?”

“I…”

Yuder hesitated for a moment, but then slowly continued his words.

“I cannot see it to feel it directly… But I think I understand that the scene you described would be beautiful.”

“Really? It’s an honor that my description was helpful.”

With a smile, Kishiar answered and brought his lips close to Yuder’s ear.

“Then someday… will you come to Peletta Castle? If your sight gets better, that is.”

Sometimes, a phrase can unexpectedly become the key to a drastic change. To Yuder, those words served such a function.

Kishiar’s words seemed to drop and knock inside his chest. It tumbled and crashed and then disappeared as if sucked into a vacant hole that was hiding in the deepest part of his bottom.

‘Someday, will you go to Peletta? There’s a sea there too.’

At the faint voice overflowing between the closed gaps, Yuder stopped breathing for a moment and slightly parted his lips.

What? When did I hear such a thing from Kishiar again?

As if responding to his question, a fragment of an old memory smoothly surfaced.

‘Ah… yes. It was when I had just joined the Cavalry.’

The memory came back easily enough to make it strange why he hadn’t thought of it. It was from the time when Yuder had just joined the Cavalry in his previous life.

Yuder enjoyed training late into the night, and occasionally, Kishiar would show up unexpectedly and give some advice to the one who stayed late, watching his movements before leaving. He remembered those words as something that had casually slipped out during their conversations…

‘No. Were those really meaningless words?’

While Kishiar might not know, it could be that Yuder, who had heard those words, remembered them quite impressively. He thought that might be the case.

Why had he forgotten it until now? It was surprising and breathtaking to learn that such a small memory was linked to Kishiar and was one of the holes made inside him.

The weight of things he hadn’t even known were gone suddenly weighed heavy on his head.

“…Commander.”

Yuder called out to him in a daze.

“Hm?”

“I am…”

He wanted to say something, but the words wouldn’t leave his mouth. What could he possibly say? Could it be that they have had a similar conversation before? That he had been to Peletta, but it was the day he killed Kishiar La Orr? He swallowed a multitude of stories that shouldn’t have been said. Instead, Yuder decided to give a different response.

“…Understood. I will go.”

For the first time, he was grateful that his likely distorted face was hidden behind bandages.

“Even if my eyes don’t recover, I will go to see the sea.”

“Really?”

Kishiar responded cheerfully. Yuder nodded, leaning weakly into him. The arms that held him tighter, as if they had been waiting, were extraordinarily warm.

Even though he started the conversation presuming rejection, Kishiar never once expressed any negative feelings towards that fact. The only time he showed negativity was when he revealed self-blame towards himself. That terrifyingly tender demeanor, that incomprehensible honesty, that warmth he had never experienced in his past life, felt like a punishment to Yuder Aile.

“Good. Make sure you don’t regret it. Look forward to it. But I don’t like the assumption that you will go even if your eyes don’t get better, so let’s leave that out.”

“…Do you believe the magic you will cast tomorrow will completely cure my condition?”

Yuder asked slowly. The answer that came back was concise.

“Rather than believing, I have to make it so.”

The sentiment behind those words, was it confidence or a wish? Either way, he could definitely feel that Kishiar was determined to heal him.

Yuder was suddenly reminded of the day Kishiar had said he wanted to become a hero. Although his dream of punishing those

who were exploiting the Empire was still underway in a place unknown to anyone, and the Duke of Peletta, known to the world, was just a troublemaker, he was the one who would save Yuder tomorrow.

Then what would be the difference between him and a hero?

Even if he had accomplished nothing and had regressed in his previous life, this time, he will become the hero he dreamed of. He will make sure he does.

Yuder lifted his head towards where Kishiar's face would be. As he thought about how he wanted to see his expression right in front of his eyes, a voice tinged with a faint smile echoed.

"Do you think it's somewhat cool? I feel like you do."

"…"

"I'm kidding."

Yuder sighed. He couldn't imagine the calm man who had laughingly brushed off and manipulated all the malicious rumors surrounding him, showing an inhuman patience within that bright voice. But ultimately, that too was Kishiar La Orr.

'Ultimately… it was Kishiar La Orr.'

Yuder sensed something from his thoughts and recalled it once again.

Before Kishiar came to the bedroom, he was pondering why Kishiar felt different from the others, whose attitudes towards him had changed across his past and present lives. Suddenly, the answer he couldn't find then seemed to spring up from within him.

While comparing the two lives, if his relationships with others had changed from one to ten, his relationship with Kishiar, despite appearing to have changed the most, somehow still felt the same in some aspects.

‘Yes… that was it. I’m not sure exactly what to call it…’

Once he knew the answer, once he filled all the holes, what would change?

He already felt as if he was being sufficiently punished. Would he experience even greater suffering here? Or…

“I think your body temperature is dropping. Shall we head in?”

“Commander, you mentioned earlier about your ability… I haven’t heard it yet.”

Yuder murmured, grabbing the hand that was adjusting the blanket wrapped around his shoulders, while gently brushing his cheek. The hand was devoid of strength, yet Kishiar halted his movements at once.

“Ability? Ah, were you that curious?”

“I thought your ability would be of the enhancement type, but was I wrong?”

“It’s enhancement, yes, but… It feels a bit different from the kind of power that members with physical enhancement in the Shin Division possess.”

Mumbling something unintelligible, Kishiar decided it would be faster to demonstrate with his body. He took Yuder’s right hand and lightly held it.

“When I first awakened two years ago, I thought my power was simply to enhance my strength. As time passed, I concluded it was an ability to change the direction of power while in an enhanced state. But not long ago, my thoughts began to change slightly.”

“Now, watch.”

Kishiar loosened his grip, letting go of the hand he was holding. Naturally, Yuder’s hand, which had been supported, should have fallen limp. Yet, astonishingly, it did not fall but seemed stuck within Kishiar’s open palm.

Yuder felt an unseen force moving intensely upward from below Kishiar’s hand. It was as if an invisible wind was lifting his hand from beneath. Shortly after, when Kishiar cut off the force, Yuder’s hand fell powerlessly. Kishiar caught it swiftly and smiled briefly, as if asking if he had seen it.

“You, who are sensitive to power, must have felt how it moved, right?”

“…It felt like you were pulling the target and letting it go.”

“That’s right. In the enhanced state, I can pull the power toward me or push it away. It’s still difficult to move consciously, so this is my limit. But, in others’ eyes…”

“They would see you moving extremely fast, or deflecting before being hit.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Images of Kishiar from his previous life, facing Pethuamet in single combat, and training with his Cavalry members flashed quickly through Yuder’s mind. The mystery of Kishiar’s movements, which made it seem as if the enemies were hurling themselves at him, was finally resolved.

‘So according to this, did he develop his ability in two stages…? All in just two years?’

Kishiar simply said his thoughts had changed, but Yuder’s judgement was a little different. Depending on training and environmental factors, an Awakener’s power could be refined or evolved indefinitely. It was an incredible feat that Kishiar, who likely hadn’t received proper training like the others, had advanced his ability this far - something that even Awakeners ten years in the future would find unbelievable.

“…You’re incredible.”

“It’s just a shift in perspective. When you sit down and have some spare time, what else is there to think about?”

Kishiar casually made a comment that could make the Cavalry members, who had toiled and sweated daily to develop their abilities, vomit in disbelief.

“The last time my thoughts changed was actually very recently. I realized something after the day I went to find you.”

On that day when Kishiar had run through the forest to find Yuder, who had gone to kill Pethuamet, he had mentioned feeling a thin string inside him that he hadn’t noticed before. But from the sound of it, that wasn’t the only thing he had discovered.

“I was too overwhelmed at the time to realize, but after reflecting, I noticed that the flow of power I used while running that day was slightly different from before. I think at that moment, I might have desperately wanted to pull something towards me.”

Kishiar cradled Yuder in his arms and stood up, uttering one last word.

“Even this might not be the complete form of my power. Unlike magic that operates on set formulas, there’s no definitive answer to this power.”

Kishiar, who used to move slowly as before, passed through the forest in an instant and reached Yuder’s bedroom. The interior of the Western Mage Union base was absolutely quiet, everyone seemingly asleep.

“Well, everything turned out just as I promised. No one will know we’ve been for a walk.”

The man laid Yuder on the bed, gently brushed his hair aside, and covered him with a blanket.

“You don’t have a fever yet, but I’ll stay here until you fall asleep. If you need anything, just tell me.”

As he heard the sound of the man sitting down on the chair next to the bed, Yuder was engulfed in a mix of emotions that left him speechless.

“Just go and get some sleep.”

“On a day like this, forcing myself to sleep would only make me feel more tired.”

“But still…”

“It’s more comforting and relaxing for me to stay here, so don’t worry.”

Despite hearing this, Yuder too felt like sleep was far away that night. After several failed attempts to fall asleep and a faint sigh, Kishiar murmured quietly.

“Why?”

“…No, nothing.”

“Are you hungry?”

“No, not at all.”

Despite the firm denial, Kishiar, who had been moving a bit, grasped Yuder’s hand and placed something in it.

“It’s late and there’s nothing I can give you right now, but you should at least have this.”

Yuder was startled to realize the object now in his hand had a surprisingly familiar feel to it. There was no way he wouldn’t recognize the object wrapped in crinkling paper, with its round, hard surface.

“…This is.”

Just as he was about to ask if it was candy, his fingers brushed against the worn, soft part of the wrapper. Yuder immediately recognized what the candy was.

“Isn’t this the candy I had?”

“That’s right.”

“How did you…”

“I had it after it fell out of your clothes while I was treating your injury. I thought you didn’t want to eat it and left it behind… but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“You’ve been keeping this since then? I thought someone had thrown it away because I couldn’t find it.”

“It’s not something that rots easily.”

After replying nonchalantly, Kishiar added after a moment of silence.

“…I couldn’t help but pick it up, thinking it could have been the last thing left by my assistant.”

Yuder, feeling guilty for surprising him, immediately closed his mouth. Kishiar gently posed a question.

“But the wrapper is quite worn, why didn’t you eat it for three days? I gave it to you to eat one per day… didn’t it taste good?”

“No, that’s not it. The reason is…”

Yuder hesitated, gently biting his lip. It was only after he recovered the candy that he was able to objectively reflect on his own behavior, soothing his anxious heart by touching the candy until the wrapper was worn, especially when faced with this question from the person who had given it to him.

“…If you hadn’t returned after three days, I was planning to eat it then.”

“And after eating it?”

“I would have gone out to find you.”

At Yuder’s unwavering response, Kishiar exclaimed, “My goodness,” and burst into laughter.

“Alone?”

“Haven’t I already said that I would?”

“That’s true, you did… but…”

The muttering man suddenly fell silent. The next moment, a sweet sigh filled with warmth and laughter flowed from him.

“…Hmm. What to do. Right now, I really… feel something irresistible.”

Before he finished speaking, his lips approached and lightly kissed Yuder’s forehead, then slid down to touch the tip of his nose, both cheeks, and finally his lips. Although Yuder was surprised by the sudden contact, he didn’t stop the soft kisses that grew gradually deeper.

Finally, when their tongues entwined for a long moment before parting, an unmistakably hungry breath flowed between them.

“…I’m glad you didn’t lose it. Sleep well.”

It was the first time he had received such a farewell with their foreheads and noses touching.

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Chapter 309

The next day, when Yuder awoke, his side was empty. But the hard, round candy still held tightly in his clenched fist assured him that last night's events were no dream. He fiddled with the candy, fumbling with the wrapper to open it. After a long time, he finally managed to put the candy in his mouth. The taste was as sweet and tangy as he remembered.

He lay there, listening to the boisterous voices echoing from somewhere. The exterior bustled with an unusual energy, as if the previously silent house had regained its owners, making the tranquility of the moments before seem like a lie.

It wasn't hard for him to guess why the atmosphere had suddenly changed. It was due to the magic casting scheduled for that day.

"Oh? Yuder, are you awake?"

Around the time he had completely melted and swallowed the candy, Gakane opened the door and entered. With his sharp intuition, he quickly noticed Yuder's wakefulness and came closer.

"Did the noise wake you? I kept asking them to prepare quietly, but they're all like that… Are you still sleepy? How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. Not bad."

Upon hearing Yuder's reply, Gakane felt his forehead for a fever, then assisted him to sit up.

"Everyone's a bit frantic preparing for the magic casting this evening. But you, of course, just have to have a normal meal with the Priest as usual, so don't worry too much."

“No, he must take his medicine too.”

Priest Lusan, who had followed Gakane into the room, added from the side. It seemed Lusan was also looking forward to the events of the day, his voice notably brighter than usual. Yuder finished a simple meal with their help, then had the bandages on his arms, legs, and face changed.

“Since you’ll be going outside today, I brought your bag. We thought you should dress warmly. Is there any specific clothing you’d prefer?”

“No, anything is fine.”

“Hmm… Okay then… Oh.”

While rummaging through the bag, Priest Lusan suddenly picked up something that had fallen out between the clothes, a puzzled look on his face.

“What is this? Is it a magic stone?”

There was only one item in Yuder’s humble belongings that could be called a magic stone. Yuder remembered the stone, a power medium he had received from Kishiar before coming to the west.

“If it’s the stone with a dark red hue… yes, it’s something similar. May I see it?”

Yuder took the cold stone handed over by Lusan. The journey to the west had been quicker than expected, and he hadn’t had the chance to directly examine the medium’s power. Holding the medium after a long time, its touch felt strange and unfamiliar.

‘Kishiar said this stone has an amplification effect when power is poured into it… I wonder if it would have been better to use this against Pethuamet.’

But even without it, Yuder had been confident enough to face Pethuamet at that time, and he had succeeded. Although the unexpected inversion of blood had led him to this state, he hadn't been desperate enough to gamble on an untested, uncertain element.

Yuder put the stone aside without regret. Gakane and Lusan seemed curious about the nature of the medium, but upon hearing it was a gift from Kishiar, they quickly accepted and withdrew their interest.

The rest of the day passed as usual. Through the members who visited in turns, Yuder heard about the preparations for the grand magic being conducted near the Magic Spring Ruins. Occasionally, when his fever rose or dropped, Lusan was by his side, offering a damp towel or a warm heat pack.

Finally, as the sun began to set, Lusan gave him a few pills.

"I've prepared a concoction with a greater proportion of pain-relieving herbs than before. I heard you might experience pain as the spell progresses. I'm not sure about its effectiveness, but… I wish this were the last time I had to offer you this."

"Thank you, Priest."

Lusan let out a shy laugh at the sincere thanks. He untied the holy symbol hanging around his neck and held it in Yuder's hand as he offered a short prayer.

"May the warmth of the Light shine equally upon you, Yuder, and upon us all."

As the prayer came to an end, there was a knock on the door from outside. The ones who entered were the Eldore siblings and an unexpected guest.

“I brought this mage here because she kept coming and going outside. She said she has some business with Yuder.”

“…It’s Lorna Beit.”

Yuder was taken aback at the identity of the hesitating mage. He hadn’t expected that she, who had been more devoted than anyone else to studying the Magic Springs, would come here.

She introduced herself and then remained silent for a long time. Yuder waited for a while, then sighed and took the initiative to speak.

“Have your injuries from before fully healed?”

“…Yes. Thanks to your help, there are no traces left now. I’m healthy.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Lorna had been injured in a fight with Pethuamet, who had absorbed the power of the amplification circle, and had been carried here. Yuder had been a bit worried about whether she would fully recover, given his last memories of her condition. It was a relief that she was fully healed.

“When I was injured and in danger… I later heard that you were a great help. I wanted to apologize for my actions then, but I only now have come to do so.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

Yuder had hardly expected someone like Lorna to heed his warnings from the beginning. He didn’t want to hear an apology in this manner, not when it wasn’t her fault that Yuder got hurt, and she didn’t contribute any more to the injury treatment than the Priest did. However, it seemed as if Lorna misunderstood his intention, her voice losing some of its energy.

“I see. I figured you wouldn’t accept it. Well, it’s only to be expected.”

As Yuder considered whether or not to correct her, she hurriedly continued speaking.

“All along, I’ve always thought that a mage must naturally bear the minor dangers that occur during research. I also thought it was only natural for others not to understand mages. Especially for an Awakener. But… after going through this incident, I’ve had a lot of thoughts.”

“…”

Lorna had been saved several times by Awakeners. The research they conducted almost caused great harm beyond the Great Sarain Forest to other regions, and the one who killed the massive monster and saved them from this crisis was also an Awakener. She confessed that she was shocked for the first time seeing her colleagues’ humiliating inability to handle even the small monsters easily controlled by the Awakener, who knew nothing about magic, and their greed-filled obstinance.

People say that mages must be born ambitious to achieve greatness, but no one had taught her how ugly that could become. That ugly sight was the dark side of herself that Lorna had been ignoring.

“I used to be proud of being a mage… but now, I feel ashamed. Upon reflecting on the purpose of what I was doing, I feel even more so.”

Lorna’s gaze fell upon a black stain that couldn’t be entirely hidden by the bandage. She kept silent for a long time, then lowered her head.

“It’s hardly an adequate substitute for an apology, but I have worked really hard to find the solution for the spell that will be cast today. Because of this, I was able to gain the Commander of the Cavalry’s permission to visit you.”

Yuder was surprised to hear that she hadn’t simply come on her own, but had received Kishiar’s permission, but the other members were silent, perhaps suspecting something.

“I hope the answer I’ve found will be of help. That’s all I wanted to say.”

Lorna rose, gave a respectful greeting, and then left.

“I still don’t like mages, but I heard she really worked hard this time. She even collapsed a few times from not sleeping and studying even though she was injured, so the Priest had to be called in.”

Gakane muttered a bit gruffly next to Yuder, who was remaining silent.

“I guess that’s why the Commander allowed her to see you.”

Yuder nodded with a strange feeling. After the members chattered about how they didn’t need to accept the apology forcibly and how they needed to curb the pride of the arrogant mages, they finally calmed the atmosphere.

“Now, we’re going to move you to where the source of magic, or whatever it is, is located.”

The Eldore siblings surrounded Yuder and declared briefly.

“We decided to do this because, according to the results of yesterday’s experiment, it seemed less burdensome than moving you directly. Kanna and the Commander will be waiting over there, so don’t worry.”

“And you?”

“We will follow after moving you.”

Hinn and Finn held hands with Yuder between them. Yuder gently clenched the hem of his uniform cloak. The stone, the medium of power that he had taken out from his bag earlier, was in its pocket.

“We’re moving now! Get ready!”

Yuder couldn’t see the light flowing out from Hinn and Finn’s arms, but he keenly felt the energy around his body fluctuating. It was like a small whirlwind-like storm swirling around him, and after a moment, he felt as if he was being swiftly pulled and flown somewhere.

After the fleeting sensation of being swept away like a leaf in the wind, the surrounding air changed and he was falling. Someone who had been waiting caught him gently and held him up.

“You made it alright.”

Kishiar’s cheerful voice came from above.

“How does it feel to move using the Eldore siblings’ power?”

“…It wasn’t bad.”

“That’s good to hear because you are fearless. Now, take this.”

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Chapter 310

Kishiar began to move without hesitation. Yuder, feeling the absence of anyone nearby, voiced his puzzlement.

“I thought Kanna and the others were with us.”

“I sent them to the mages since I had something to look into. They’ll meet us when we arrive, so don’t worry.”

Yuder was often amazed at Kishiar’s acute perception. In his current situation, unable to walk on his own, he had no more to say, so he simply closed his mouth. Soon enough, the clamor of voices drew closer, and Kishiar finally set Yuder down, lightly supporting his shoulder so he could lean on him.

“Yuder! You’re here!”

Kanna, the first to rush over, without hesitation, grabbed onto Yuder’s opposite arm.

“Commander, I’m sorry we’re late. We can support him now, so you can let go…”

Emun, who followed behind, faltered with a slightly frightened tone. Kishiar, who had been silent, slowly let go of Yuder’s shoulder. Though the others didn’t seem to notice anything unusual about this, Yuder detected a hint of subtle regret.

“Alright. Go ahead.”

The vicinity of the Magic Spring was morphing into a state both similar and different from before. The barrier magic and amplification circles that previously filled the area were mostly deactivated, with new magic circles interspersed between them. The 14 mages, who

were in control of 12 circles, were busy preparing for the end and thus only noticed Yuder's arrival a bit late.

"Well, well. You're here."

Micalin Punt, the leader of the Western Mage Union, approached while rubbing his grimy hands. Seeing Yuder being supported by his comrades, the old mage's eyes shook as if shocked, but he quickly collected himself and concealed it.

"All our preparations are complete. If you give the order, we can activate the circles at any time."

"Good to know."

Kishiar, who had been slowly scanning the area, directed his gaze at the still calm Magic Spring. Between the gaps of the magic circles that once surrounded the area like a wall, he could see a hint of magic power shimmering and flowing out like a mirage. Thanks to the long-term amplification, the region was pulsating more vigorously than ever with pure magic power.

The red eyes passed over the faces of those waiting for an unknown command and finally stopped on Yuder's face, quietly standing while being supported by two comrades. Despite having just arrived after an uncertain period, his forehead and neck were already beaded with cold sweat. Yet, he endured with calmness, not due to any pride or shame, but seemingly from familiarity with such a state. His pale face, revealed under the bandages, was utterly expressionless, as if he didn't even consider his situation to be difficult. In fact, he'd been like that ever since he woke up from his injury.

Just as Yuder's eyes darkened slightly, the last of the waiting Cavalry members finally arrived.

"Commander. We've all arrived!"

“Everyone, to your positions.”

Turning his body, Kishiar issued his command to all. It was time to see the result of the solution they had been working on for so long.

Those supporting Yuder helped him sit on a circle close to the Magic Spring. The twelve mages, including Micalin, went to their respective circles, while the Cavalry members spread out as if protecting the perimeter. And Kishiar stood on the largest circle drawn in a position where he could face Yuder.

Even with Kishiar merely taking his position, all felt a profound sense of their Commander’s presence, as though he had stepped up to the very front. With the formation where he stood at the center connected like spider legs to twelve other formations, Yuder’s formation seemed like prey ensnared in the tendrils of the spider web.

“I will activate the first formation.”

Following this declaration, the first mage muttered the spell in a tense voice. At this, the formation beneath him began to glow, and the power emanating from the Magic Spring increased explosively. It was evidence that the formation was drawing in the surrounding magic power correctly. Soon after, the second and third mages made the same declaration and activated their formations. The formations beneath them, outlined by the magic stones they held in their hands, began to gradually heat up, glowing brighter with every strained swing of their arms and chant of their spells.

“I will activate the eleventh formation.”

“I will activate the twelfth formation.”

In the midst of a whirl of enormous energy, finally, Micalin activated the twelfth formation. The surrounding trees and the forest

shivered in unison as a strong wind blew. The Cavalry members, wary of being swept up in this power, braced themselves and observed the spectacle. They had been briefed about what to expect, but the sensation of witnessing it firsthand was in a completely different realm.

As each formation activated, the intensifying white light followed the connected lines toward Kishiar in the center. When all twelve formations had finally been activated, the gathered light was so intense that Kishiar's figure was barely discernible.

The Cavalry members, only just realizing the depth of their Commander's magic power, were intensely anxious for Kishiar's safety, while the twelve mages were tense for a somewhat different reason.

The success of the spell being cast today hinged entirely on how well the Duke of Peletta could manage this enormous magic and adjust each formation. Normally, such important work would be entrusted to the most proficient and experienced person, naturally expected to be the Leader Micalin, but the Duke of Peletta had firmly refused and taken the position himself. So far, he was chillingly perfect in controlling all the formations.

Kishiar, his hands wrapped in golden magic, controlled the light converging on the formation. As the gathered white light at the center changed to blue, then from blue to red, the magic power emanating from the well increased, causing the waves sweeping the surroundings to intensify.

As time passed, the mages were soaked in sweat and Kishiar, who was controlling the entire formation, started to breathe a little harder. Finally, the light gathered in the center turned black, and the strong wind subsided slightly. This was the moment when the power they had tried to complete through the formation had finally taken shape, signaling that the time had come.

The mages, through Kishiar’s control, reached out unanimously toward the black light gathered in the central formation. They combined their powers to cover Yuder’s formation with the light. As the blackened formation lifted into the air and whipped around, Yuder’s figure inside was hidden from view for a moment.

“Is… is everything going okay?”

Kanna, standing right next to Emun, listened to his panting murmur without even blinking her eyes, her gaze fixed on the spectacle.

Where Yuder stood, his aura appeared as if alive, greedily devouring the light pouring into it in a swirling torrent. Despite having gathered and expended such light for so long, the speed at which it disappeared was so fast that, in the blink of an eye, Yuder’s form was revealed once again to all present.

The mages chanted their spells with greater intensity, the spirals of power flowing from the Magic Spring increasing in strength. Still, Yuder’s aura persistently devoured the light, again and again.

Not long after, one of the mages let out a stifled groan.

“The… the speed is too fast!”

He crumpled, unable to bear the excessive energy drain, dropping to one knee. The flow of magic power heading towards the central aura wavered. At the same time, one of Kishiar’s arms, wrapped in a golden light, jerked and stiffened.

“Commander!”

Someone called out, but no disaster struck. Kishiar, as if anticipating the situation, calmly made a small wave with his hand. The energy erupting from the Magic Spring explosively increased, causing the golden light enveloping his hand to grow. Just this

increase in light was enough for the wobbling power to regain its stability quickly.

Even when several other mages dropped to their knees afterward, Kishiar each time amplified the light with the same method, supplementing and controlling the unstable power of the aura. His gaze was solely fixed on Yuder Aile in front of him.

“I have no idea what’s going on.”

“…The spell is complete, but the target requires more magic power than that. If we continue this way, we might break due to insufficient magic power.”

Emun muttered while tapping his foot, and the mage closest to them, stationed at the seventh aura, briefly explained while panting.

Finally, when all the mages besides Micalin reached their limits, the light absorbed by the aura enveloping Yuder was almost entirely golden.

“When will this end…”

Someone muttered in exhaustion when, finally, even Micalin Punt faltered and dropped to his knee. The elder mage kept chanting his spell until the moment he fell, but there was an instant of weakness in the power flowing toward the central aura.

When the only light flowing into the aura became Kishiar’s golden light, brought forth through the Magic Spring, everyone present had a premonition of the impending failure.

However, Kishiar’s next move was something no one could have predicted.

Instead of the twelve auras that had lost their efficacy, he directly reached out toward the Magic Spring. The golden power surged

explosively, tracing a complex trajectory of light. Over it layered different colors of energy that seemed to protect the magic, and suddenly, a new light began to gush over the abandoned auras. A much more potent spell was being rapidly woven.

“Ah…”

With an awestruck gasp from someone, the newly completed spell was immediately cast over Yuder’s aura. A tremendous burst of light forced everyone to close their eyes. They felt a strong wind sweep over them.

After a moment, when people raised their heads, they saw that all the light had faded, and the wind had calmed. The aura had not shattered and remained intact. No one was injured.

There was no failure.

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Chapter 311

The vicinity of the Magic Spring was in complete disarray, covered in broken and bent branches. The crevice in the rock that had once violently spewed magic power was now eerily silent. Amid the quiet, Kishiar turned his head slowly and looked at the Cavalry members.

“Kanna Wand, Gakane Bolunwald. Check on Yuder’s condition.”

At his command, the two headed towards Yuder. The mages, leaning on the remaining members for support, retreated to the outskirts of the circles. Now, only Kishiar and Yuder remained within.

“Yuder. Are you okay? Can you hear us?”

“…”

In response to his comrades’ call, Yuder moved his head faintly. Ever since the spell began to be cast, he had been swept up in an immense power encasing his body, unable to focus on anything external. Experiencing only the force in an unseen state was more painful than he had thought. It was like the moment when the spots created by the power of the Red Stone started to spread widely, making his whole body burn. The aversion, the immediate desire to escape from this place, rose like a wave in his mind, and it took immense effort to calm it down.

Nevertheless, the reason he could hold on till the end was because he sensed that Kishiar was somewhere beyond the invisible barrier in front of him.

The familiar energy that seemed to blend into the massive force circulating around him. It was undoubtedly Kishiar’s power that he

had seen and felt before. This energy helped calm Yuder and allowed him to accept everything.

‘Accepting… yes, that’s how it felt.’

He had thought that a spell to remove the trace of the magic circle that kept amplifying the venom from the absorbed Pethuamet’s fluid would feel like something draining from him. Instead, it was the opposite. Yuder’s body greedily filled itself with the energy coming from the outside.

Slowly, Yuder clenched and unclenched his fist, gauging his own physical state. His insides felt hot like a stove with lingering warmth, but it wasn’t as heavy as before, when he couldn’t even lift a finger. Seeing his movement, Kanna and Gakane’s faces brightened simultaneously.

“It seems to have worked!”

“The spots, the spots are gone.”

Everyone present, without exception, rejoiced at the sight of Yuder’s now clear body. Until before the spell was cast, his body had been covered in black bruise-like spots. No matter how many bandages and medication were applied, the grotesque spots couldn’t be completely hidden. But now, surprisingly, they had vanished significantly.

Listening to his comrades’ cheering voices, Yuder finally reached up with both hands and untied the bandage covering his eyes. After several attempts, the tie finally came loose and fell around his neck.

He felt a dizzying pain when he first forced his eyes open, but it soon subsided. Yuder blinked carefully several times. His field of vision was still filled with black spots. One eye was still unable to distinguish light. However, the other eye could distinguish the fact

that it was night and the shapes and colors of those around him, which was much better than before.

“…”

Yuder lowered his gaze from the sky. Not far away, a figure stood tall over the magic circle, looking his way. Even with blurry vision, Yuder couldn’t mistake who it was. His senses were all too focused on Kishiar, there was no one else it could have been.

In his overlapping, hazy vision, Yuder felt for a moment that Kishiar was smiling.

As his heart jumped, Kishiar slowly knelt on one knee, and sat down.

“Commander!”

As he tried to rise in surprise, a thunderous roar echoed from behind him, trembling both the earth and air.

“Some, something is happening at the Magic Spring!”

The mages, who were maintaining a safe distance, screamed in urgency. The crevice behind Yuder, as if struck by an earthquake, shook violently. Yuder, feeling the danger of a possible explosion or collapse, didn’t hesitate to gather his strength.

However, the strength he sought from the earth stirred only the rocks nearby, but failed to fully manifest.

‘Damn it. My power isn’t fully recovered yet.’

As he was about to muster his strength again, the earth rumbled once more, and the shadow clone summoned by Gakane enveloped Yuder protectively. In the sudden movement, something stone-like tumbled from his pouch.

‘The medium!’

Without a second thought, Yuder seized it and turned his head toward Gakane.

“Gakane. Protect Kanna and the Commander first. Step back.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Step back!”

If only he could muster his strength, nature would not harm Yuder. Dispersing the shadow clone, Yuder stood on his own feet. The moment he concentrated his power into the medium gripped in his hand, a brilliant red light burst forth.

In the spectacle completely different from when Alik Pelgin, the apprentice of Thais Yulman, used his power, Yuder was stupefied for a moment. He then belatedly discovered light flowing from his own right hand as well. The two lights, both of the same hue, connected, causing an intense pulsation within Yuder.

After a while, the red light from the medium faded, but the light in Yuder’s hand continued to glow intensely. He instinctively knew it. The purest form of power possessed by the Awakener was now pulsating in his own hand.

As long as he held this power, it seemed that there was nothing he couldn’t do.

Yuder extended his hand toward the violently shaking crevice. Using his power, he tried to suppress it forcibly. The trembling rocks stopped for a moment, but pain shot through his hand. He was about to force his power once more when someone came behind him and grasped his wrist. Startled, he stiffened and tried to look back when he felt a firm chest bump against his back.

“…Don’t try to suppress it.”

Kishiar murmured lowly. Despite his weary appearance, his whispering voice was as gentle as ever.

“The magic power that had been bundled together for a long time is now rapidly depleting, releasing the things that had sunk to the deepest part. If you suppress it, it will only make things worse… Yes. Can you try to calm it slowly?”

“Commander, are you alright?”

“I am fine.”

Kishiar let go of his hand. Yuder exhaled deeply and looked forward again. The red light from his hand became a little stronger, but the pain was now bearable. Feeling the weight of the person supporting him from behind, Yuder started to handle his power more gently. Soon, the ominous rumbling of the earth subsided slowly, and the violent wind quieted down as well.

As the slowly diminishing tremors finally ceased, everyone exhaled in relief. Yuder looked down at the red light fading within his hand, then raised his head. Kishiar, in his blurry vision, was making an unreadable face.

“…Yuder Aile.”

“Yes.”

“Can you see me?”

He had thought he would ask about the red light, but he asked a completely different question. Yuder blinked his eyes before nodding in response.

“Yes… I can see.”

It was still challenging to say that his vision was clear, but he could now see Kishiar's face. It was strange, both familiar and different from the image he had drawn in his mind when he had felt his face with his fingertips previously.

In the darkness of the night, Yuder was mesmerized as he looked at Kishiar's golden hair, faintly illuminated by a distant light, his cheek that held a peculiar sensual aura due to the sharpness from being a bit thin, his exhausted but deeply emotional red eyes, and his long eyelashes casting a shadow over them.

Could this be the man he had been with just until this dawn? Even though he had touched, hugged, and kissed him countless times, he felt a strange sensation as if he had met him after a very long time. As he gazed at him, lost in the waves of emotions welling up within him, Kishiar also silently watched him.

"… Excuse me. Now, um. Has the explosion ended?"

Only after someone called out in a drained voice from afar did Yuder come back to his senses.

"About that red light just now… no, never mind. What happened to the Magic Spring? Can we go and take a look?"

Caught off guard as he had forgotten where he was while staring at Kishiar, Micalin pleaded with a desperate voice. Only then did Kishiar, who had shifted his gaze from Yuder, calmly open his mouth as if nothing had happened.

"It's still risky, so let's do it tomorrow. Until then, the Cavalry will keep watch here in shifts. Of course, after regrouping at the base."

"Understood."

Kishiar briefly praised everyone for their hard work. The mages, looking at Yuder who had managed to stand on his own, were

speechless, filled with awe. Some were even sobbing. Following Kishiar's order, they did not argue any further and returned under the protection of the Cavalry members.

Finally able to stand on his own, Yuder returned to the base and was met with Lusan, who had been waiting for them.

"My goodness, Sir Yuder! You've finally recovered!"

The young Priest who ran out scanned Yuder up and down before clasping his hands together to give a prayer of gratitude. Yuder had to experience the feeling of almost vomiting several times, as his companions, who had been trying to maintain their calm in front of the mages, suddenly rushed over and embraced him without considering their strength.

"Hey, stop. Yuder's gonna burst!"

Yuder wobbled in his companions' grasp, turning his head. A few steps back, Kishiar was lightly smiling. His small, insignificant smile, unlike his usual relaxed grin, remained deeply in Yuder's mind.

He had kept his promise to help him recover.

The weight of that promise was so heavy that he could not even measure how much it meant to him.

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Chapter 312

“Alright, let’s calm down now and assess how much your condition has improved.”

Despite the significant passage of time, the members were reluctant to let Yuder go. Their pure joyous embrace had long since morphed into an enforced contact, a conduit through which pent-up anger was unleashed. As Yuder let out a small groan under the grip of their tight embraces, warning him not to even dream of engaging in the dangerous act of fighting monsters alone again, Kishiar, who had been leaning against the wall, intervened.

“But, Commander. Do you think Yuder would even tolerate this if not for the circumstances?”

“You’re right. Let us scold him a bit more.”

The members protested with a sense of regret, but Kishiar was a step ahead.

“Well, if you want to continue, I can’t help it. I don’t want to miss my turn to scold him either. Let me join in.”

As Kishiar approached with open arms, the members quickly lost their will. Yuder sighed with relief, finally released from the intense pressure that nearly broke him. Lusan, who had been watching and laughing from a distance, approached to examine Yuder closely.

“The venom that had seeped into your skin is rapidly disappearing, and your body temperature is normal. Let’s see if you can accept the divine power now.”

Unwrapping the bandages around Yuder’s limbs, Lusan scrutinized the remaining dark discoloration and infused them with

divine power. Until recently, these spots would temporarily disappear when receiving divine power, only to increase again. However, this time was different. As Lusan noticed the spots gradually fading to a normal color without reappearing, a sense of relief and joy appeared on his face.

However, while his body was regaining strength relatively quickly, his eyes were not showing much improvement from their initial recovery. In particular, the left eye, where the black stains were most spread, was still unable to distinguish between light and dark.

Lusan posited that it was due to this area absorbing the most fluid from Pethuamet, and while slow, he believed that it would gradually improve over time. He then infused Yuder's body with divine power a few more times. In the brief respite as his comrades stepped back to guard the Magic Spring, Yuder quietly spoke to Lusan.

"Priest."

"So, because the depth perception might be different with one eye, it may be more comfortable to keep it covered until it gets better… Yes?"

Lusan, who had been mumbling, responded belatedly. Yuder, pointing to Kishiar with his eyes, who was not too far away giving instructions to the members, continued his words.

"I think I'm fine now. Could you perhaps also check on the Commander?"

"The Commander?"

"Yes. He looks tired, so please take a look when he returns to his room."

Upon hearing Yuder’s request, Lusan glanced at Kishiar with a puzzled look. To him, Kishiar seemed no different than usual. But Yuder thought differently. He believed that Kishiar was merely maintaining his calm in front of the others, but was in fact very exhausted.

Lusan tilted his head at this but agreed to examine Kishiar discreetly as Yuder asked. Despite this reassuring answer, Yuder, who knew Kishiar’s body was different from ordinary people, couldn’t be entirely at ease.

Kishiar would undoubtedly come to find him tonight. Although they hadn’t specifically discussed it, Yuder was certain Kishiar would sneakily come to check on his condition personally once again.

‘I’ll examine him then.’

For the first time since regaining his sight, Yuder walked into the bedroom where he had been staying. He hadn’t realized it while he was blind, but the room was much more spacious than he’d thought. This couldn’t be a typical mage’s bedroom. It was clear he must have usurped Micalin’s room or perhaps it was meant for Kishiar.

By the bed, which was positioned opposite the window, he could see a basin and a water towel, along with a nicely wrapped bag for room heating. Items that had now become useless. His gaze scanning the furniture - not luxurious, yet equipped with everything necessary - stopped at a table and chair not far away.

It was the very spot where Kishiar had moved him several times to feed him. Yuder approached and gently stroked the back of the chair. The fact that he and Kishiar had sat on this old wooden chair didn’t feel real.

He carefully settled himself on the chair. The part that touched his back was extremely hard. As he closed his eyes and looked down at

the empty table, his senses were subtly stimulated, evoking a curious familiarity different from moments ago.

The smell of dry dust. The deep scent of grass from the forest flowing in through the window gap. The slight creak of the table due to a slightly misaligned leg.

And the faint traces of a cool, stale body odor embedded in the chair.

"…"

Yuder opened his eyes again. The faint traces he thought he had sensed vanished in an instant.

'What am I doing?'

Later, he looked at himself in a mirror for the first time since recovering his sight. Even though some of the stains had faded, the remaining traces on his body were unsightly at best. He hadn't realized it when he couldn't see, but his forehead, the whites of his eyes, his neck, and the backs of his hands were all splotchy, like a person stricken with a plague. His colleagues and Kishiar, who hadn't shown any expression even after seeing him in worse condition, suddenly seemed formidable. Not to mention Kishiar hadn't said a word even when he impulsively kissed him…

The light violet spots originally on his right hand were now concealed among the black stains, but Yuder guessed they were probably not completely gone. It was due to the red light that had flowed from the back of his hand when he used the medium.

'Why didn't the power simply amplify as it did when Alik used it, but red light flowed out instead?'

The medium he pulled out again was now a transparent and faint black, as opposed to the deep burgundy it had been before. He

infused it with power again, hoping against hope, but there was no change.

Yuder put the medium on the table and lifted his hand again. When he tried to use a tiny bit of water power, a thin stream of water spiraled around his finger before abruptly breaking off and falling.

‘Recovery…seems to be happening, but this is not much different from before using the medium.’

There was only one conclusion he could draw from his attempts.

‘Just as the Red Stone’s power from my body absorbed the energy in Kishiar’s body, this time, I think I used the Red Stone’s power enclosed in the medium.’

The medium was a tool made by utilizing the principle of magic tools, which could automatically cast a specified magic if fueled with magic power.

Thais took advantage of the fact that magic power could be inserted into a medium for magic tools, and created a new, sturdy medium to confine the power of the Red Stone. It was a medium where nothing would happen even if power was infused because there was no magic to output originally. However, due to the peculiarity of the Red Stone’s energy, it showed a behavior of amplifying the power considerably and releasing it when infused with an Awakener’s power.

Yuder had once conjectured that his body might have become a living medium for the power of the Red Stone, given his unique characteristics.

‘If that is the case, the event that transpired was an instance of two mediums simultaneously unleashing their power, hence the reaction differed from other times when others used their power. It might be an extension of the same phenomenon…’

The sensation that it wasn’t the amplification of the infused power, but the pure energy within the medium itself being drawn out and connected to his hand, lingered faintly in his body. Yuder looked down at his empty hand, clenching and unclenching his fist. As he attempted to consciously summon the Red Stone power, it did not reappear. It seemed as though the power only manifested when Yuder was desperate or only half in his right mind.

‘Nevertheless, seeing that the medium became transparent, it seems certain that the power contained within has disappeared.’

Fortunately, everything that had transpired that day occurred in the forest, under the cover of night. Even if the mages had seen what Yuder had done, they would not be able to accurately guess the truth. The identity of the medium and the power of the Red Stone were matters that must remain secret for the time being.

‘But what happened with the Magic Spring Ruins?’

Yuder recalled the voice that had whispered to him to hold back his hand and not forcefully suppress the ground. As he followed those words and did not resist the movement of the earth but instead moved as though gently coaxing and soothing it, the earthquake soon subsided.

Kishiar had said it was due to the long-accumulated magic power disappearing. Yuder remembered Kishiar speaking as if he was expecting some sort of change to occur around the ruins and the Great Sarain Forest after the magic power was exhausted from casting a gigantic spell. However, he had not at all anticipated that this change would be an earthquake.

‘If the exhaustion of the magic power accumulated in the Magic Spring caused the earthquake… perhaps the balance has been broken again.’

The talks about ‘balance’ that Lusan and Kishiar had speculated upon each for their own reasons simultaneously came to Yuder’s mind. Lusan speculated that the imbalance of the massive power at the Magic Spring Ruins could have caused the appearance of the monsters, and Kishiar said the cause of the abnormal growth of the Great Sarain Forest, including the cracks, could be the same.

If that was true, he began to worry terribly at the thought that the earthquake that occurred today might lead to the appearance of more cracks or abnormal behaviors in the monsters.

Just as Yuder was beginning to consider whether or not to leave his place, a sound was heard, tapping against the window. Despite being on the second floor, Kishiar, with his calm face, was jokingly smiling outside the window.

“May I come in?”

“…”

He had expected a visit, but not through the window. With an indescribable feeling, Yuder opened the closed door.

“What are you doing? Why didn’t you come in through the door…”

“I was curious about the feeling of having someone answer when I knock.”

Yuder was speechless at the sly response. After closing the window and looking around, he let out a small sigh.

“So, did you find it amusing?”

The answer he received was an embrace.

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The momentary disconcertment swiftly vanished. Yuder looked up at Kishiar who, hugging him tightly, hadn't spoken for quite some time. He felt relieved to witness firsthand the emotions shading his now smile-less face. As he cautiously raised his hand, Kishiar narrowed his eyes and pressed his cheek against it. The sight of this beautiful beast rubbing himself against him sent tingles down his fingertips. His smooth, white cheek, warm to the touch, was astonishingly silky. Between their chests, he could feel a powerful heartbeat that belonged to neither of them alone.

"…I'm…I'm okay."

A murmur escaped Yuder, feeling as though he should say something. The words, even to his own ears, sounded awkwardly clumsy. Instead of answering, Kishiar tightened his embrace before finally loosening it after what felt like an eternity.

Even after collecting his emotions, he continued to gaze at Yuder's face as though seeing him for the first time.

"You mentioned that you had asked Priest Lusan to examine me."

"Ah, yes."

Even though Kishiar had assured him that he was fine, he could still see signs of fatigue on his face. Worried that he might be hiding any physical discomfort, Yuder nodded. At his words, Kishiar laughed, remarking how exhausting it was to avoid Lusan because of his request.

"I'm fine, both in body and spirit, so don't worry. If I seem drained, it's probably because someone suddenly exerted a lot of energy as soon as they could move."

“…”

His concern for him had turned into a spear aimed back at himself. Yuder averted his gaze without a word. At the time, he had the medium in his hand and thought it could be dangerous, so he had exerted his power immediately, which must have been surprising from Kishiar’s point of view.

“Speaking of which, I forgot to ask properly about the medium you used and the power it held. What was it, exactly?”

Kishiar’s gaze landed on the empty medium on the table. Yuder picked it up and briefly explained the assumptions he had made thus far while Kishiar scrutinized its interior. He did not seem overly surprised as he listened, indicating that he might have had some suspicions of his own.

“You drew out the power inside the medium… Yes, that’s the closest assumption for now.”

“…”

“Weren’t you hurt?”

Kishiar asked, his red eyes solemnly fixed on Yuder’s face. While it wasn’t entirely painless, Yuder nodded his head. Kishiar didn’t seem entirely convinced but decided not to press the matter any further. He took the medium, tucking it into his possession.

“I will look into this myself. If you notice any changes in your body, let me know. And if any mages ask, simply tell them it was the power of an Awakener.”

“Understood.”

“And… next time, it would be nice if you could give some notice before moving. If I can at least brace myself, it might be a little

better.”

Yuder felt the sting of an unexpected jab and swiftly changed the subject.

“…What about the Magic Spring Ruins? I’m worried there might be more anomalies like before, with monsters acting strange or new cracks forming.”

“Are you changing the subject now?”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed, but he soon let out a sigh-like chuckle, playing along with Yuder’s pace.

“Well, it’s hard to guarantee anything, but I don’t think such things will happen again, at least for now. Remember what I said when you calmed the trembling earth?”

“You said the amplified magic power that had been pooling up was disappearing, and the remnants deep below were rising up.”

“Yes, exactly. It’s an extension of the conversation we had last night.”

Kishiar had spent quite some time investigating the Magic Spring around Yuder, reading and re-reading the research notes of the mages in his personal quest to find a cure for Yuder. The mages, fascinated by the peculiar nature of the place where the pure magic power had long been concentrated, had grandiosely named it the ‘Magic Spring’. Yet, to an outsider with no interest in power, different aspects of the scene became apparent.

“I’m not sure exactly why, but it’s clear that magic power has been stagnated there for a long time. However, just because it’s been there for a while, it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s natural,” Kishiar stated.

In the research logs of the first mage who discovered the Magic Spring, Kishiar discovered that the range of the power beneath the accumulated magic power coincidentally almost matched the entirety of the Great Sarain Forest.

It couldn't have been a coincidence. The mages simply cared more about the prospect of gaining power than that particular fact.

Kishiar posited a bold hypothesis, stating that the Magic Spring was the point where the magic power concentrated beneath the Great Sarain Forest had managed to escape, and as the influence of the concentrated magic power expanded, so did the forest.

"If you try to inflate a pouch that's already full and is spilling out from a small opening, it's only natural for it to burst," he explained.

The Great Sarain Forest had long been suffering from abnormal growth. The western borderlands were notoriously monster-infested. If the magic power concentrated in the spring was the cause, the answer wouldn't be to contain and amplify it but to exhaust it and create a way for it to escape.

That night, when the enormous spell to dissolve the remaining traces of the amplification in Yuder's body succeeded and the earth tremor followed, Kishiar considered it a potential new path for the energy beneath the ground to escape. It was still a speculation, but in time, he would be certain.

"If I'm right, there will be no more severe monster outbreaks after this year. The expansion of the Great Sarain Forest will cease, or some change will occur."

It was a prediction like a dream. Yuder blinked and hesitantly asked, "If that happens… what will you do?"

"Well, first of all, I would have to stop those who are rushing towards the Great Sarain Forest out of greed? I'd have to assign

more useful research to the mages here.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“If I don’t, who will? They owe us a lot. I intend to reclaim it, without leniency.”

A radiant smile, loaded with significance, bloomed on Kishiar’s face. Only then could Yuder also afford to smile.

“Also, I will inspect if the strange crack in the air phenomenon we discovered this time is occurring elsewhere.”

Yuder suddenly looked up. If Kishiar intended to investigate the crack, which was like a harbinger of disaster, the most suitable person for that task was Yuder himself.

“Leave that task… to me.”

“I thought you would say that. No.”

A firm denial came back as if expected. When Yuder widened his eyes in surprise, Kishiar playfully tapped his nose with a laugh.

“You can apply for it once you’re fully recovered.”

“…”

“You shouldn’t even look at it like that.”

Yuder wondered why he kept laughing as if he had seen something. Yuder tried to plead again, but Kishiar took his arm and led him away, saying it was late.

“Now that we’ve confirmed your improvement, you should rest. If you want to get better quickly, you need to sleep a lot, right?”

“Are you going straight to sleep, Commander?”

“No, I am heading to the forest to inspect our members.”

No matter how you looked at it, the one who needed to rest here was not Yuder but Kishiar. Yuder bit his lip as he watched Kishiar, who still looked weary.

“You should rest too, Commander.”

“Are you still worrying about me? Even though I’ve said I’m okay.”

“Everyone knows to take turns without needing instructions. If that’s the case, why don’t you take a short nap here? I’ll wake you up.”

“Just for a bit…”

Kishiar, who had been leading, suddenly began to be led. He displayed a rare moment of surprise. Seizing the opportunity, Yuder successfully pushed him onto the bed. The tall man lying defenselessly on the bed left his disheveled clothes as they were, looking up at Yuder.

“…This is quite an unusual feeling. Looking up at you like this, you seem more attractive than usual.”

“Don’t joke about this.”

Underneath the tousled blond hair embedded in the sheets, the seductive eyes creating a captivating curve momentarily mesmerized Yuder. But he barely managed to ignore it. He cautiously undid the robe, worrying that Kishiar might get up and leave again, but Kishiar did not resist, just chuckling.

Finally, after making him lie down properly and covering him with a blanket, Yuder was already out of breath, though he hadn’t done anything significant.

“You look tired.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Why don’t you just lie down here too?”

“I told you I’m not tired.”

Yuder sat on the chair beside the bed where Kishiar had been sitting the night before. The heated gaze that seemed to follow his every move made his skin tingle.

“…As promised, I’ll wake you, so please rest now.”

“This is me resting.”

“If you keep looking at me, how will you fall asleep?”

“Do you think it’s too harsh to deny me the pleasure of looking at you now that you’ve regained your sight?”

Kishiar chuckled softly, then exhaled a long breath. His gaze was still fixed on Yuder. Yuder felt a tingling sensation from the look in Kishiar’s eyes as he stared at his black, stained left eye.

It was a look filled with insatiable longing, as if he didn’t want to miss a single thing about Yuder.

“Please sleep.”

“…I can’t sleep.”

Although he seemed too old to make such a complaint, Kishiar’s expression was serious. Yuder hesitated, then opened his mouth.

“Shall I hold your hand?”

“You’ll hold it?”

“If you want, I will hold it until you fall asleep.”

It was what Kishiar had done for him, and Yuder was willing to do the same. However, unexpectedly, Kishiar did not immediately accept the offer. A sudden smile, tinged with warmth, crossed the face of the man who had been silently looking up at Yuder.

“…I want you to rest, and you want me to rest. So it seems the best thing to do is for us both to rest together.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you’re going to hold my hand, why don’t you just lie down with me.”

Finally, Kishiar gave up on behaving and pulled Yuder to him. By the time Yuder came to his senses, he was already lying under the covers Kishiar had opened.

“What are you doing?”

“Here, now we can both rest. Sleep well.”

Despite Yuder’s resistance, it was in vain. Yuder incredulously stared at Kishiar, who closed his once sleepless eyes while holding him tight.

“…Are you sleeping?”

“…”

“Stop fooling around and let go of me.”

“…”

“Commander.”

After several calls, Yuder finally sighed deeply, releasing the tension in his body. The thought of how to explain this if someone came in was daunting, but he didn't want to forcefully push away the sleeping Kishiar.

That's right. He didn't want to push him away. That was the problem…

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All Yuder could do while lying still was gaze at the face before him. Through the blurry vision, he found himself naturally reminiscing about a particular time in the past as he admired the handsome features reflected in his sight.

In his previous life, a life full of undone things, they often shared the same bed. Most of the time, it was for relations. In the darkness of unlit nights, even the sharpest eyes could hardly discern the outline of the other's face. Therefore, Yuder's memories of sharing a bed with Kishiar were mostly dim and hazy, marked by instances like the hand gripping his waist when they were lying face down, the cold intrusion beneath their clothes in their sleep, or the fleeting warmth when they were lying on their side, back touching back.

'Thinking about it now, we mixed our bodies well even without showing each other much,' Yuder mused.

After Kishiar's death, he hadn't shared a bed with anyone else. He was aware that others found his preference for solitude over the Emperor's marriage proposals, without even having a lover, quite off-putting. But he didn't care. He neither wanted to lay body to body with another, nor desired sex; he found it much better to spend that time working. After all, no one showed genuine interest in Yuder, a commoner. Even now, he thought his choices were right.

But the irony wasn't lost on him that it was Kishiar he found himself back in bed with. Even if he had decided not to deny the attraction he felt for Kishiar, he couldn't stop a bitter laugh from escaping his lips.

'It's as if after all these years, I've circled around just to come back here,' he thought.

However, even though they were lying in the same bed, things were different from before. For starters, they had never lain facing each other and looked at each other's faces in their past life. Despite knowing that Kishiar was an Alpha Awakener and that there was a chance of being overpowered at any time, Yuder didn't feel any apprehension or tension toward him. In fact, the transformation was so drastic that he was struggling against the urge to touch the face before him, which was quite chilling to consider.

He had noticed the changes in him for a while now, but today everything seemed even more apparent. He wondered how it would have been if Kishiar had drawn him into bed like this before his second gender manifestation. Although he wasn't certain, he wouldn't have minded using all his strength to escape.

Unlike other emotions, trust and faith required time. The man who loved breaking walls had indeed spent a long time breaking all the walls that surrounded Yuder.

After tearing down all these walls and gaining complete access, what did that man intend to do? What would become of the Yuder Aile of before? If Kishiar were to discover that he now felt more than just relief towards his endless patience, how would their relationship change?

Kishiar had handed Yuder the key that could change their relationship. Yuder had yet to fully grasp the weight of that small key in his hands, but at this moment, he had a vague sense that something would change if he decided to turn it.

Everything would change. The tranquil yet tense silence, and the desires both of them had melted and lumped together within the sweet serenity.

Those condensed feelings would burst out the open door, consuming everything. And then, there would be no going back to how things used to be.

Could he truly handle that?

In stark contrast to his cool and rational mind, a tumultuous unease arose and subsided within his chest, as volatile as a flaming fire.

Yuder drew a deep breath and closed his eyes. His intention was to remain so only for a moment until he woke Kishiar, but when he collected his senses, daylight had already broken.

"…"

Yuder jolted upright, looking down at the blanket that covered him snugly. The adjacent space was empty, but a paper-folded flower, glittering charmingly, was laid on the pillow. An overwhelming emotion swept over him speechlessly the moment he realized that the flower was fashioned from the candy wrapper he had left behind from his breakfast the previous morning.

'In celebration of your recovery. The real one will come later.'

On unfolding the paper flower out of curiosity, a line of text that seemed almost teasingly playful was revealed. At first, it appeared to be some sort of prank, but it was clear that it wasn't just a simple jest, but a genuine gesture to celebrate his recovery.

'…I should let him know that it's unnecessary.'

Yuder silently folded it back. He was beyond startled, even somewhat embarrassed, by the fact that he had slept unaware while Kishiar had gotten up, written this note, and folded this candy wrapper into a flower.

However, Yuder didn't discard the paper flower. He stored it in the deepest part of his bag where no one else could find it.

The Cavalry members were elated by the news that Yuder had recovered enough to walk on his own. Although they had taken turns keeping watch over the Magic Spring Ruins throughout the night, none of them seemed fatigued.

According to them, strange sounds resembling wind and trembling earth echoed throughout the Magic Spring Ruins all night. Kishiar, who had inspected the area with the members, agreed that his predictions seemed to be coming true.

He finally had a long conversation with Micalin, the head of the Western Mage Union, one-on-one. It was impossible to know what had transpired during their talk, but after coming out of the room, Micalin announced surprising news with an expression mixed with exhaustion, admiration, and a hint of fear. The Duke of Peletta had agreed to fully support the research that the Union was conducting.

However, the research would not focus on trapping and amplifying the energy present in the Magic Spring Ruins. Instead, it would monitor the current slow leakage of power and future changes, and examine the monsters appearing in the Great Sarain Forest. Although much had changed, the essence of the study - researching the effects of pure magic power - remained the same. Not all the remaining mages were excited about this proposal, but most of them had seen and felt firsthand how uncontrollable power could bring catastrophe. In the end, they all agreed this was the best course of action.

“They said that if no results are produced within this year, the Western Mage Union would have had to abandon the research due to lack of funds. I guess this worked out well, given how expensive it is to conduct magic research.”

“In truth, discovering a method to neutralize the effects of the monsters that have absorbed the amplified power is regarded more highly among mages than grand dreams of harnessing pure magic

power. After all, monsters are an immediate, practical problem. They say this result will set a great precedent.”

Following Gakane’s comment, Kanna grumbled in dissatisfaction.

“While I suppose the Commander and Yuder agreed partly out of fear and remorse, it’s clear they didn’t make their calculations without any benefits in mind.”

Emun grumbled, and the other members nodded in unison. They had all gathered for breakfast, waiting for Kishiar who had left to personally receive the imperial edict.

Yuder, half-listening to his comrades’ conversations, watched the mages wandering nearby. The mages, unable to dare approach the Cavalry members confidently situated in the middle of the base, wandered from afar. Occasionally, when their gaze met with Yuder’s, they would flinch their shoulders, seeming both terrified and fascinated, before disappearing.

‘Seems like my reputation is quite something.’

Just then, the door opened and Kishiar entered. In his hand, he held a small folded letter, and his expression was significantly more serious than when he had left.

“It seems we all have to move immediately.”

His words caused a sharp change in everyone’s gaze.

“What happened, Commander?”

“It seems that the ‘village’ that was in the Great Sarain Forest until yesterday has suddenly disappeared this morning.”

Though he ambiguously referred to it as a village, there was only one village that could exist in the Great Sarain Forest. Yuder,

recalling the members of Star of Nagran that popped up in his mind, opened his mouth.

“Did they… run away to avoid us?”

“That’s the most likely scenario.”

Kishiar had planned to secretly send a knight from the Peletta Order to the base village created by the Star of Nagran to gather information and initiate contact. He had predicted that they might flee after the rumors about Yuder spread, but it seemed even the knights hadn’t expected them to disappear overnight without a trace.

“What about the people in the village who aren’t Awakeners? Did all of them disappear as well?”

“The reports suggest so. However, not all may have vanished, so a search is underway.”

The Peletta Knights were in the process of tracking the village and its members who had disappeared in an instant and looking for information left by, or potentially to be left by, those connected to them in the village.

However, there were limits to the search and tracking within the Great Sarain Forest by the non-awakened Peletta Knights alone. Kishiar had ordered some of the Cavalry members to join them to assist in the search and collaborate with the second detachment soon to arrive.

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“Besides Gakane Bolunwald and Hinn Eldore, who were originally scheduled to stay here, Finn Eldore and Kanna Wand will also move with the Peletta Knights to assist in the search. When the second dispatch team arrives at Great Sarain Forest, they will signal us. When you meet them, explain the situation and involve them in the search operation. As I mentioned before, Gakane will take command, while Kanna will handle the release of necessary information.”

Yuder turned his head towards Gakane. Originally, Gakane had planned to stay at the Western Mage Union base until the arrival of the second dispatch team, and then join them to lead the remaining monster extermination mission. Despite being flustered by suddenly having to track the Star of Nagran, Gakane only moved his Adam’s apple up and down once, showing no apparent fear.

“I understand. Leave it to me.”

There was a newfound seriousness on his face, as if he had made a decision. Kishiar nodded and swept his gaze over the rest of the team, starting with Yuder.

“The rest of you have places to go with me in the meantime. Get ready and follow.”

With a statement to meet again at the mages’ base in the evening, Kishiar concluded the meeting.

“Didn’t the villagers say they were the strange organization that fought with Yuder when they went to the Duke of Apeto’s place last time?”

“That’s correct, but it’s a bit different. I’ll explain the details on the way.”

With excited expressions, the Eldore siblings nodded and followed Kanna. Yuder exchanged glances with them, then approached Kishiar with Lusan and Emun. Although he doubted whether Kishiar had really rested while he was asleep, his complexion was noticeably better than yesterday.

“Commander, where are we going?”

“To meet the Knights from Tainu.”

“People sent from the Duke of Tain?”

“The one who gave the order must be Baron Willhem of Tainu, but above him is the Duke of Tain, so yes, in a way.”

“Then why aren’t we waiting here for them? Why are we going ourselves?”

At Emun’s tense question, Kishiar smiled as if it were a good question.

“That’s because they didn’t come here to meet us.”

Before departure, Kishiar instructed Lusan and Emun to prioritize Yuder’s protection in case of combat. Yuder thought it was excessive, but Lusan and Emun agreed without hesitation.

“The Knights from Tainu have been surveying the surrounding circumstances from the border town outside Great Sarain Forest for quite some time. They finally headed towards the forest this morning, likely due to the aftermath of the magic we cast yesterday.”

Even while leading three people with nearly no combat capabilities through the narrow spaces between the trees of Great

Sarain Forest, Kishiar showed no hesitation. As if going for a leisurely stroll, he continued his explanation with light steps, and Yuder thought quickly as he listened.

“If they entered the forest this morning and didn’t come straight to the Western Mage Union’s base, it means they came here with another purpose.”

“That’s correct.”

“Could it possibly be… Tain’s trade base?”

“That’s correct.”

At Kishiar’s agreement, the others looked at Yuder with surprise. Yuder, having already heard from the Western Mage Union, was able to consider this, and he briefly explained. Meanwhile, he recalled the conversation he had had with Kishiar not long ago.

Kishiar had spoken as if he had been aware of the illegal trade activities conducted by the House of Tain for quite some time. After discovering information that there were several victims of illicit trade within the village of the Star of Nagran, his plan to track down the matter had gotten somewhat derailed. Now, the Knights of Tainu who had voluntarily ventured into the Great Sarain Forest made for good prey.

‘If the Knights who came into the Great Sarain Forest were really headed to locate the trading outpost of House Tain, it would mean that the Duke values it as a significant asset.’

His heart beat a little faster at the thought that he might finally uncover the answers to the illegal trade circumstances of House Tain that he couldn’t fully grasp in his previous life.

“So… If what Yuder heard is correct, there are rumors that House Tain has established a trading outpost within the Great Sarain Forest

and they've been buying strange things? But what on earth are they trying to buy that the Knights had to come all the way here and hurry there?"

"Slave trade. There were also talks of them trying to import dangerous drug ingredients."

At Yuder's succinct answer, Emun furrowed his brows.

"Slavery…? Wait. It isn't related to the human trafficking we heard about in the Awakeners' village before, is it?"

"Probably so."

"…Good Lord."

Emun covered his mouth. Lusan also recoiled, making a face as if utterly disgusted.

"Slave trade, you say? How could a place like House Tain attempt such a thing? It's something that will never be forgiven by God."

Yuder did not miss the fleeting, icy smile on the face of Kishiar, who was leading the way.

"Well. It can be argued that being a ducal house, they are all the more capable of carrying out such deeds."

His tone was soft, but the coldness in his eyes didn't change. Yuder felt a renewed realization that Kishiar did not harbor good feelings towards the ducal houses.

"There it is, finally visible."

Not long after, they discovered something and stopped. On the side of the well-kept road where trees were rare, there was a small,

seemingly half-built cabin. Although there was no sign of people, the door was open as if someone had rushed out.

“According to Micalin Punt, that was the first outpost that House Tain began to build.”

Yuder was surprised to learn that Kishiar had even asked about that while conversing with Micalin. There was nothing inside the cabin. However, they soon discovered a section of the floor in a corner that was unnaturally lifted.

After lifting the clumsily covered wooden piece from the raised floor, Emun found a hole beneath and immediately stooped to check its interior. Thanks to his ability to hide in the darkness, he could see better than others in the dark.

“There’s a narrow basement below. Nothing’s in it… wait a moment.”

Emun who jumped down towards it, returned shortly holding something. It was a torn and ragged piece of a small garment. Everyone fell silent at the sight of the ragged piece.

“It looks like a child’s clothing. I guess they really did confine people here.”

“We’ll need Kanna to confirm that.”

Kishiar, who gave a brief reply, ordered the piece of clothing to be kept and exited the cabin. He then followed the trade route toward the location of another outpost. They discovered three more half-built houses, but they couldn’t find other pieces of clothing or any other items. How long had it been since they started moving toward the fourth outpost? They abruptly came upon the people they had been searching for.

“…Ah, the blood…”

Emun muttered with a pallid face, staring at the gruesome scene unfolding before his eyes. In the middle of the trade route established by the House of Tain, three Knights clad in armor bearing the insignia of Tainu lay sprawled. The putrid scent of blood and flesh attacked his nostrils. At a glance, they were beyond saving - dead.

“Could it be the work of monsters?”

In response to Lusan’s question, who had also turned pale, Kishiar pondered while examining the traces of blood splattered as far as the nearby trees.

“Well, it might be… but…”

“It was the work of humans.”

All eyes turned to Yuder upon his assertive claim. He stepped forward and gestured to the deceased Knights. They lay mutilated, limbs and abdomen slashed, as if they were hacked up dolls.

“If they had encountered monsters and were fleeing, they would have fallen face down. However, all died facing upward. By their expressions, it’s clear they died instantaneously, oblivious of their impending death. And…”

Yuder kneeled and gingerly lifted something draped on one of the Knights. What should have been a bag was reduced to nothing but a strap.

“A monster wouldn’t neatly cut away a bag like this. It’s definitely the deed of a human.”

“I see.”

Kishiar agreed with Yuder’s analysis, approaching the scene. Emun, unable to muster the courage to view the brutally

dismembered bodies up close, stayed back, watching from a distance.

“Considering the blood is still flowing, they haven’t been dead long. It doesn’t seem like a sword was used. The ability to kill three Knights in an instant and vanish without a trace…it’s likely the work of an Awakener.”

There were Awakeners who came to mind. Those of Star of Nagran who had lived in the Great Sarain Forest for a long time. Could those who were rumored to have suddenly disappeared actually still be here? Sensing a whirlwind of thoughts crossing his mind, Yuder turned his gaze to Kishiar.

“They might still be nearby.”

At Yuder’s words, Kishiar nodded. They began to survey the area, leaving the corpses behind.

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Emun and Lusan were full of tension as what was expected to be a straightforward encounter with Knights suddenly took a severe turn. Yuder, clasping his hands together, realized anew that despite their readiness for life-or-death struggles, they were people still more accustomed to peace. This was evident in Lusan, who constantly muttered prayers under his breath, and Emun, who tightly gripped the dagger at his waist, refusing to let go.

‘If only half of my strength had returned, I could have reassured them.’

Though disappointed, Yuder was not overly worried. He was confident he could handle any considerable enemy with even the smallest stream of power. If the opponent was not an Awakener, his worries would reduce even further.

“There, the fourth outpost is in sight.”

Kishiar, who was walking ahead, murmured, halting his steps. The place he gazed upon was the last destination the deceased Knights were aiming for. An eerie wind blew around a small house, neglected among the wildly grown grass and trees.

Yuder felt a strange familiarity tingling somewhere beyond his senses as the wind touched his skin. He instinctively hardened his gaze, surveying the surroundings. There were certainly no signs of human presence, but…

“Before we go in and investigate, first…”

“Wait! It’s dangerous.”

Driven by instinct, Yuder pulled back Kishiar, who was standing at the forefront. Simultaneously, a sharp, lethal attack flew from the front where there was nothing a moment ago. Along with someone's scream, all of Yuder's senses heightened to the utmost.

There was something. Since when, or from where…!

"So, we've been discovered after all."

Suddenly, faces that were not there just a moment ago appeared as space tore before his eyes. There was a woman with her hands raised in caution and a man with a calm expression—a pair. Yuder swallowed hard as he recognized the man's face.

"…Nahan."

"You still remember my name, how delightful."

The man, one side of his face distorted by burns, smiled cheerfully at Yuder.

"I was regretful to see how much your condition had worsened since our last encounter, but your sharpness is still intact. Admirable."

"…"

"I heard plenty about the tale of you and your brothers upon my arrival here. It would have been better if we had not met at all."

"I warned you not to call me that way the last time."

Hearing Yuder's emotionless, cold voice, Nahan let out a laugh, his face still distorted.

"No matter how much you deny it, just like blood ties cannot be undone, those of us who shared power are all brothers and sisters."

If he had the strength, he would have retaliated right then and there, and the fact he couldn't was deeply regrettable. Ignoring Nahan's provoking remarks, Yuder opened his mouth.

"Did you kill the Knights from Tainu?"

"That wasn't me. Ershi, standing next to me, did it."

Nahan nonchalantly replied and nodded towards the woman gasping beside him, who tightly held a blood-stained bag on her waist.

"Ershi has no patience. Well, they deserved what they got, and mercifully, we sent them away without pain, so they shouldn't have any complaints in the afterlife."

Nahan seemed unchanged from before, still casually spouting blood-stained words with a calm voice, still easily dismissing human lives, exactly like the last time Yuder saw him.

'Of all times to encounter him, it had to be now.'

The situation was not favorable. If his power had fully recovered, it might have been different, but dealing with Nahan was challenging at a mediocre level.

"Going by the name, is he the Awakener from the Star of Nagran who you met twice?"

At that moment, Kishiar, who softly gripped Yuder's rigid shoulder, whispered in a low voice, tilting his head.

"Yes."

"I see… finally meeting the one we couldn't find for so long, right here."

His red pupils slowly swept over Nahan. Only then did Nahan seem to fully acknowledge Kishiar by his side, slightly opening one eye.

“Since you’ve confessed to committing murder, you won’t complain if you’re arrested here. Let’s retrieve the bag first, then we’ll hear the details.”

“Commander.”

Yuder gently held the hem of Kishiar’s clothing, who seemed ready to jump in at any moment, shaking his head. While he did not doubt Kishiar’s strength, the situation was different with those he needed to protect involved. There was nothing more dangerous than having a weakness at your back when facing someone like Nahan, a mental type Awakener.

“So, you’re the famous Cavalry Commander, the Duke of Peletta…”

Nahan caught Yuder’s soft whisper, and an odd emotion flickered across his gaze, replacing his previous ease. It was a mixture of curiosity and caution.

“I’ve heard a lot about you. I was curious about what kind of man could have the strongest brother I’ve ever seen under his command. This is quite unexpected.”

“Why. Am I more handsome than you expected?”

“Ha-ha. Hardly.”

Nahan lowered his gaze to Kishiar’s retort, and his eyes returned to Yuder. Yuder felt an eerie unease when he met his subtly smiling eyes.

“To be precise… I was surprised because it was a face I’ve seen before.”

The moment unease became reality, a shocking, heart-stopping sensation vibrated throughout his body.

Yuder recalled Kishiar from his previous life when Nahan had used his illusion power on him. It was merely an illusion different from reality, and he had escaped quickly, but Nahan, the one who cast the power, would have known what Yuder had seen.

“You…”

“So, what do you plan to do with the bag you stole from the corpse?”

Kishiar, who hadn’t noticed the exchange of some kind of energy between Yuder and Nahan, simply asked indifferently, ignoring Nahan’s words. At that, Nahan twisted a smile.

“Well, what I’ll do with it is Ershi’s business, so let me ask her. Ershi, what do you plan to do with it? He’s asking.”

“…”

Instead of answering, the woman opened her mouth and showed her teeth in a grin. A heavy aura of brutality filled the surroundings. That alone was enough to tell what she was planning to do.

“I have a great interest in the illegal trades of the Tain Duchy. It’s not pleasant when a third party intervenes.”

“We’re not intervening. Rather, it’s the opposite, Commander.”

Nahan rebutted, raising both hands lightly, as if enjoying it. With small movements that didn’t use any powers, the atmosphere quickly

became tense. He continued speaking, as if he found the situation amusing.

“This isn’t murder, but punishment. Ershi is just a victim who was hurt by them, ran away, and did what she wanted when she came to us, and I just watched. The Cavalry happened to pass by, so who can say who’s intervening in whose business?”

With his eyes twisted in red, he said while staring intently at Kishiar.

“It’s not our fault that the Cavalry, the very ones who mercifully spared the trash of Apeto, were concerned with strangers.”

“Such a statement is inappropriate. The guilty must be punished, of course, but it is not your place to make that judgment!”

Lusan stepped forward, rebutting Nahan’s words. He was clenching his fists, unable to contain his fear, but it seemed that the horrific sight of the body he had seen earlier gave the young Priest the courage to speak up.

“Hmm. So, you’re suggesting we leave it to a god who does nothing? Or perhaps to biased, stupid humans? Or, to the Cavalry who do nothing but prostrate before enemies without power?”

Nahan’s gaze at Lusan, clad in priestly robes, was extraordinarily calm and cold.

“No. That’s not it. If you can do it, we can do it too. There’s no need to listen to the words of idiots when you have the power to act.”

The moment Lusan met the terrifyingly twisted, eerie eyes, he wobbled, seized by fear without realizing it.

“Uh, ugh, ah…!”

“Priest!”

“What the hell, ah. No, ah… Help, save me…!”

Yuder quickly supported Lusan. Facing the illusion that had suddenly overwhelmed him, Lusan helplessly floundered and screamed. Yuder was about to use his power at the sight of Lusan’s agonized flailing limbs amid his screams for help, but Kishiar raised his hand first, snapping his fingers lightly.

A blob of light, similar to what they had seen at the harvest festival, instantly destroyed the buildings and trees around Nahan and his colleagues. With the booming sound of breaking and exploding, Lusan passed out and slumped down. Yuder rose from his place, watching Kishiar immediately fly towards the front.

“Emun, take care of the Priest!”

“No, Yuder, the Commander told you to stay protected…!”

Yuder didn’t wait for the rest of the sentence and dashed off. He chased after the traces of the three people who had vanished after the explosion. It didn’t take long for him to find Kishiar standing still.

“Commander!”

“I told you to stay with the others in case of emergency, but you really don’t listen.”

Kishiar was alone. It seemed Nahan and his colleague had successfully evaded in that short span of time. His red gaze scanned the surroundings, cooled and stern.

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The moment Yuder saw Kishiar's clothes dyed red and the scattered blood on the ground, he felt a dizzying sensation for the first time.

"Commander, whose blood is that…?"

"Ah. This isn't my blood."

Kishiar calmly looked down at the blood stained on him and responded.

"I thought I almost had him… but he managed to escape."

Hearing that, Yuder finally took a deep breath and the chill in his stomach somewhat subsided. Had even a single drop of that blood belonged to Kishiar, Yuder would've undoubtedly gone to find Nahan and his companions, no matter what anyone else said. Yuder maintained his silence for a moment, then muttered, "I'm glad."

Kishiar, who had been staring at the blood staining the ground, finally lifted his gaze.

"When I only heard about his illusion ability, it didn't feel real… But having experienced it directly, I understand why my assistant gave it such a high evaluation."

"Did he use his ability?"

At Yuder's sharp question, Kishiar widened his eyes a bit, then soon smiled faintly.

"Just for a brief moment."

Kishiar explained that for a fleeting moment, when his eyes met with Nahan's who was trying to escape, he was briefly stunned due to the illusions that rapidly confused his senses. It was a very short moment, but enough for the enemy to hide.

"It felt strange. Despite knowing it was an illusion, it was so elaborate that I had to react."

"That's how his ability works."

Mental abilities might seem incredibly weak at a glance. If one has a decent amount of mental strength, they can distinguish between reality and the illusion, and the caster's combat ability itself is usually not at a significant level. However, the real power of the illusion Nahan presented was that even if one knew it was fake, it was still hard to break free from it. His illusions were not only created by Nahan himself but were formed within the mind of the one affected, making them more persistent and vicious. Coupled with his unendingly fanatical commitment to his own beliefs and his ruthlessness in not exploiting his companions as weaknesses, it was hard to find a better mental ability user in all his past lives.

However, the illusion was so powerful that even Kishiar, who would not lose to anyone in this world in terms of mental strength, had to stop even knowing it was fake. What on earth had he seen?

"But… what illusion did you see?"

At Yuder's question, Kishiar lifted the corners of his lips.

"Do you want to know?"

"If it's uncomfortable, you don't have to tell me."

"It was you."

Yuder was momentarily taken aback at the immediate response. Kishiar, who had been observing Yuder's reaction, then gently laughed, as if to lighten the mood.

"You can call me a fool. I brought you all the way here to show you something impressive, but I've accomplished nothing. I deserve to be reprimanded."

"…"

How could he say such a thing? Something in his chest felt like it was being sharply pricked by a long needle. After a prolonged silence, Yuder finally managed to speak.

"No. I… would have done the same. So, you shouldn't blame yourself."

Yuder knew very well the dirty feeling after being subjected to Nahan's illusions. Although he didn't know precisely what aspect of himself Kishiar had seen, the chilling sensation he had felt when he saw Kishiar from his previous life in the illusion was still vivid in his memory.

But that wasn't real. Recalling his past experiences of breaking free from the illusions, Yuder spoke slowly.

"His illusions are formidable but not absolute. Now that you've seen his ability, it won't be difficult to recognize and counter it next time. I was also deceived several times at first."

Having encountered his illusion three times, Yuder began to grasp a certain unique feeling, hard as it was to describe. Kishiar would undoubtedly have been able to understand much more quickly than Yuder.

"Yes. That must be the case."

The words he finally managed to utter seemed to offer him some comfort as the dark shadow in his eyes faded.

“Come to think of it, I’ve never properly heard what kind of illusion he used on you. The report was too brief.”

“…”

This time, Yuder truly felt as if he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. He tried to keep his face as unchanged as possible as he responded.

“That’s pretty much it. I don’t remember it well anymore…”

Deceiving Kishiar was as difficult as deceiving Kanna, who could read information. The scrutiny from his gaze made his hands sweat, but Yuder maintained his poker face, emptying his mind. His unfathomable crimson gaze lingered on Yuder’s unseen left eye for a while.

“I see… I see.”

“Commander! Yuder!”

Fortunately, as Kishiar nodded, Emun appeared from behind.

“There you are. I thought something happened because you didn’t show up even as time passed… oh, but is that blood…?”

“It’s not my blood.”

Kishiar calmly gave the same response he had given to Yuder.

“Oh… That’s a relief. The priest has just woken up.”

They carried the awakened Lusan back to the base of the Western Mage Union. Those who had left to search for the Star of Nagran had not arrived yet. After waking up, Lusan was so shocked

that he couldn’t have a proper conversation for a while, but after taking a rejuvenating potion, he slowly began to regain his usual self.

Kishiar called Micalin and provided information about Nahan to the mages of the Western Mage Union. He didn’t elaborate on the part related to the Star of Nagran, but just the information that he and his companions had killed three Knights of Tainu today, and had committed several murders before, was enough to make Micalin’s face pale instantly.

“We already had many injured mages, and were planning to extensively replace personnel and facilities before starting serious research. We might have to advance those plans and consider closing down the base for a while.”

While Micalin was contemplating preventive measures, Emun called Kishiar from outside the door.

“Commander. You need to come out for a moment.”

“What’s up?”

“Kanna has returned. She says there’s something she needs to report first…”

Yuder left his seat with Kishiar to greet Kanna. Seeing Kishiar, Kanna, who had returned alone ahead of others thanks to the power of the Eldore siblings, quickly started her report with a serious face.

“When I read the area around where the village used to be, I discovered information about an unexpected person who had been there.”

“Who was that?”

Yuder waited for Kanna’s response, feeling like he already knew the answer.

“It’s Nahan. He’s the illusionist who led those who appeared at the Apeto estate before…”

It was as he had suspected.

“Even so, we have just had an encounter with the man.”

“Could it be… that man… right?”

Kanna, who was about to continue explaining about Nahan, gasped in surprise. Yuder sighed and briefly told her about their encounter with Nahan and his ally. As he explained how they had killed the Knights from Tainu, attacked Lusan, and vanished with a bag that could contain evidence related to illegal trade, Kanna’s face transformed through a range of emotions.

“…Good heavens.”

“So, when was he there?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Since he had hidden the entire village using his ability and only revealed it after everyone had moved, I couldn’t ascertain every detail…”

But the information Kanna read about Nahan was concise and crucial. He had arrived there due to a conflict related to what happened in the village of the Star of Nagran and afterward had moved everyone to one place. That was all.

“A conflict… Likely related to the migration.”

“That seems highly probable. I read numerous memories of people being anxious about whether they could migrate.”

‘The consideration of whether they could migrate… Was there a dispute about whether to take only the Awakeners?’

“Nahan appears to have more authority than anticipated. If a man who is only concerned about the Awakeners decided to move everyone, there must be a reason.”

Seeming to align with Yuder’s thoughts, Kishiar paused drumming his fingers on the table and looked up.

“Did you read anything more about that?”

“No. No matter how much I tried, I couldn’t definitively find out. I apologize.”

As Kanna apologized, she closed her mouth tightly and retreated into thought before speaking again.

“However… based on the information I’ve read from the Gayle and Doyle brothers over time, there are areas that seem plausible. Although, I cannot guarantee that my thoughts are correct…”

“I’ll listen carefully and make adjustments, so go ahead and share anything you have.”

The soft tone of Kishiar’s voice seemed to give Kanna some strength; the tension in her face slightly eased.

“As I reported before, it seems certain that the interior of the Star of Nagran is divided into two factions. Regardless of Nahan’s substantial authority, if the opposition faction had strong opinions… I believe he wouldn’t have been able to completely reject them.”

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The opposition party that Kanna had mentioned must have referred to the moderate faction, which included the brothers Gayle and Doyle. Gayle and Doyle were deeply cautious of Nahan expanding his power within the Star of Nagran and candidly displayed their disapproval. As Yuder thought about the information he had obtained about them so far, Kanna's words continued to flow.

"So, we've assumed that the hardliners centered around Nahan were at odds with the moderates led by a person called Sage due to differences of opinion, but maybe the truth is…"

"That it might not be as simple as that," Yuder finished for her.

"Yes, yes."

Kanna nodded, her face flushing.

"Even based on the information we've collected so far, Nahan is incredibly dangerous and doesn't care about others' opinions. Such a person might either have much more power than I imagined, enough to make me change my mind and move, or… despite what others might think, their relationship might not be as bad as it seems."

Reflecting on future events, it seemed like a plausible opinion. The internal discord regarding the 'Star of Nagran,' which Yuder first became aware of in his past life, was set to occur much later than the current timeline. Although it was still unclear whether the 'Sage', who was said to be the mental pillar of the moderates, was the same person Yuder had met in his previous life, it was likely that their relationship wasn't as bad as they were trying to kill each other just yet.

‘If it’s true that the faction that tried to gather the Awakeners and cause terror and the faction that tried to join hands with the nobility fell apart due to internal discord… surely Nahan would be the former and the Sage the latter.’

So far, there was no information about such a group trying to approach the noble class of the Empire. It’s possible that the Sage’s faction had already started to make some moves without Yuder’s knowledge, but if there were any movements related to the Awakeners, they would have definitely caught the eyes of Kishiar and the Cavalry.

Who was the Sage really? He seemed to have recruited the Awakeners like Gayle and Doyle and done various things, but seeing that he did not actively discourage people like Nahan’s aggressive actions, was he secretly agreeing with them? Or he might have been trying to trap all those who were not Awakeners to carry out some plans.

“We’ll have to prioritize gathering information about this Sage over Nahan in the future,” Kishiar murmured, coming out of his deep thoughts.

“And Kanna, I’m sorry but could you do another search at the outpost of the Tain Family when you can?”

“Ah, yes! Of course.”

Kanna straightened her serious expression and smiled. She left to meet Lusan with Emun, promising to investigate more about the Sage. Left alone, Yuder cautiously addressed Kishiar.

“What are you planning to do from now on? Will there be any issues due to this incident?”

The knights of Tainu they were supposed to meet were dead, and the bag that might have contained evidence of illegal trade had

disappeared.

Even if members of the Star of Nagran were harboring grudges about the illegal trade conducted by the House of Tain, it would be a big problem if it interfered with what Kishiar was planning to do. Whether reading the worry in Yuder's eyes or not, Kishiar looked up at him and smiled.

"There's no need to worry. It's a bit regrettable that we didn't get the bag, but if the Star of Nagran behaves as they said, it shouldn't turn out too bad for us."

"Do you have a plan in mind?"

"Imagine, if the Tain family knew that the Star of Nagran was after them, who do you think they would ask for help?"

When an incident related to an Awakener occurs, the priority to handle it is given to the Cavalry. There was no better choice to deal with the Awakeners other than other Awakeners. Yuder blinked, feeling as if his mind was suddenly illuminated.

"That makes sense. But, they've already strained their relationship by rejecting our offer to help with the monster subjugation. I'm not sure if they will change their attitude so easily. Given the case's association with punishment, I think there's a high probability they'll try to handle it internally with their family's power alone…"

"That's only possible if the Tain family still has that much power left."

As Kishiar spoke with certainty, a childlike smile of mischief briefly played on his face.

"Of course, at first, they'll think they have to handle it that way. But think about why the Tain family asked us to handle the monster

subjugation in the first place.”

With a gleeful expression, Kishiar lowered his voice, as if revealing a secret.

“Although it’s a secret to the outside world, the current Duke of Tain is known to have poured most of the fortune inherited over generations into risky investments. Can you imagine how hard it would be to handle this matter alone, with their power tied up everywhere? They won’t be able to hold out for long.”

“…I see. In that case, we can just continue with our original plan until they reach out again.”

“Exactly.”

Kishiar had previously stated he did not want a third party to get involved in the illegal trading activities of the Duke of Tain, but if things turned out as discussed, it was more like he had actually provoked the Star of Nagran into action. Yuder was newly astounded by Kishiar’s skillful manipulation, drawing the opponent onto his palm in a tense situation.

“We’ll have to chase both and apprehend both. Things are going to get busier.”

It might have been a relief that they didn’t have to worry immediately about the monster subjugation and the Magic Spring Ruins. Kishiar planned to inform all the members returning today about this matter and issue new orders.

“Now, there’s no reason for me to stay here any longer. Those who have to stay, stay. Those who have to leave, should leave now.”

“You’re heading to Tainu.”

Remembering Tainu, where the remaining half of the second dispatch team would be heading, Yuder spoke. It was the perfect place to command tasks in the west, to observe the Tain family, and it wouldn't arouse suspicion from anyone.

Kishiar, who nodded in agreement, cast a gentle smile at Yuder.

"You're coming too."

As an assistant, it was natural for Yuder to accompany Kishiar. But due to his not yet fully recovered condition, he felt an unexpected weight in those brief words, as if he had thought he might be left behind.

"You're taking me with you?"

"Did you think I would leave you behind? Unfortunately, I don't have any candy to offer this time."

"…"

When Yuder remained silent, Kishiar messed up his hair with a laugh.

"I won't put you straight to work once we arrive, of course. Tainu is the largest city in the west, so you can get more relaxed treatment there. Focus on recovering your strength."

Yuder had no choice but to respond affirmatively. But even after he had answered, the hand that had been ruffling his hair didn't let go so easily. To a casual observer, it may have seemed like the usual playful demeanor, but Yuder suddenly felt an odd sensation.

Kishiar hesitated, looking down at Yuder.

"…Commander?"

"Hmm?"

“When will you stop doing that?”

“No, the touch is too pleasant, it’s been a while since I’ve touched it.”

Of course, the strange feeling vanished like a fantasy as soon as he spoke, but the bizarre sensation, which seemed like an illusion yet wasn’t, lingered like an aftertaste, tweaking a corner of his nerves. Yuder watched for a long time the bloodstains on the hem of Kishiar’s clothes as he turned his body lightly and slipped out. Then he furrowed his brow.

After the sun set, all the Knights of Peletta and Cavalry members who had been searching around the ruins of the village of the Star of Nagran returned. Yuder was distracted all through dinner by the noisy greetings of his colleagues, whom he had met after a very long time.

They were all surprised to see the discoloration remaining on Yuder’s skin and his left eye which had not yet regained sight. They were genuinely saddened to hear that his body had not fully recovered and he couldn’t exert his full strength.

However, as the atmosphere became a bit more relaxed, the deflated mood dissipated and finally, unable to contain his curiosity, Jimmy’s words triggered an explosion of suppressed curiosity.

“Yuder! Did you really kill that big monster by yourself? Can you explain just a bit about how exactly you killed it? Everyone says it was as big as a mountain, I can’t even imagine. Can we still see its body?”

“Yuder. On the way here, people in every village were only talking about this, did you know? Although they don’t know the name well yet, it’s probably going to spread quickly once we return to the capital.”

Jimmy, who hung on his arm and sparkled his eyes, and Ever who gleefully told him the news he didn’t want to know, were simply overwhelming. The members who came with the second dispatch team were all curious about Pethuamet, and couldn’t bear not knowing how it had been killed. The storm of questions only subsided a bit after Kanna intervened and mentioned that there was a warehouse where they were preserving the monster’s dissected body. Only then did Yuder learn that there was a separate place for its storage.

Excited, the members decided to go see the body together right after dinner. Yuder didn’t want to see it, but he couldn’t refuse their request and reluctantly got up from his seat. Just his luck, Kishiar wasn’t there as he had gone to meet the Knights of Peletta.

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“The place where we store the dissected corpse is here. The Magic Tool Materials Storage.”

Kanna led them down to the basement of a vacant building. Yuder realized it was the place where they had once held the assassins who had infiltrated to target Ejain. Even though the culprits had been caught long ago, it seemed that the place had continued to be used for storage.

“I wish you didn’t have to cut it. I wanted to see how big it was in its intact form.”

“They had no choice but to cut it because it was so large. The mages have to do their research, and they can’t go to the forest, right? I was only able to see a portion that the Commander had cut, and it was so large it made my jaw drop.”

“Really?”

Upon hearing Kanna’s words, Jimmy and the other members who had been lamenting regained their curious expressions immediately.

“Yes. Just don’t be too surprised when you go in.”

The warehouse was incredibly dark. Unable to see ahead, one of the members who had been included in the second dispatch team lit a small flame to illuminate the surroundings. However, the sight of Pethuamet’s huge head, with wide-open eyes right in front of them, made the members scream as if they had seen a ghost.

“I reacted like that the first time too…”

Gakane murmured, laughing aimlessly with Kanna. The severed head of Pethuamet was placed in the center of the warehouse. Behind it, boxes were stacked, containing severed limbs like legs or tails. However, the monster's body didn't rot even after death, so there wasn't a bad smell.

The members realized anew how terrifying the monster in the rumors that Yuder had killed was when they saw Pethuamet's body. Jimmy shivered, noticing that one of the spikes stuck in Pethuamet's tail was larger than his own sword, while Ever stood in front of the giant head, trying to measure its size.

"I've never seen such a big monster before. It's impossible to even pierce its skin with a sword, let alone kill it."

"That's why the Commander had to dissect it himself. It was impossible for others to cut it so cleanly. The head part is going to be sent to the Emperor as a tribute."

"Really? Can't I try cutting the skin too? I'll only try a little bit! Really just a little bit!"

Yuder watched the chattering members from a corner. When he killed Pethuamet, he had never imagined such a mundane future. It felt almost like a lie that the members in front of him were the same ones who had been pained by the endless swarm of monsters in his previous life, their expressions fading day by day.

"Who's making such a noise… huh?"

At that moment, a faint voice was heard from behind. Yuder, who turned his head, blinked his eyes as he encountered the mage Lorna who just popped her head out of a small door stuck to the wall. The surprised expression was mutual.

"…It was you guys. Did you come to see the monster's corpse?"

“Yes. We didn’t know you were here, we’re sorry if we disturbed you.”

“No, not at all.”

Lorna subtly shifted her gaze, scrutinizing the members who still hadn’t noticed her and were making a fuss. Yuder tilted his head, sensing a fleeting feeling.

“But… what were you doing inside?”

The only reason to come to the warehouse was to find something, but Lorna’s hands were empty. He glanced inside to see if there was anything, but couldn’t see anything due to the thick darkness.

“Um, well… I was…”

“Oh, someone was here first?”

Just then, one of the members noticed them, and Lorna could no longer hide. Kanna, noticing her, seemed to grasp something and exchanged glances with Gakane before approaching.

“Mage.”

“I apologize. Knowing it’s due to be discarded tomorrow made me feel regretful, so I wanted to take one last look. I meant no other intent.”

Upon seeing Kanna, Lorna immediately raised her hands in an honest plea of innocence. Her words didn’t seem to hold any deceit, but the content was still difficult to grasp.

‘…Discarded? What are they going to discard?’

Other members wore similarly puzzled expressions. Kanna sighed and opened her mouth, after looking at her companions.

“Everyone, please wait here for a moment. I’m going to have a little discussion inside with the mage.”

“Can I listen too?”

When Yuder interjected, Kanna seemed lost in thought for a moment, creasing her brow, then agreed. Gakane, already seemingly aware of what Kanna would say, calmly whispered his intention to guard the door, and courteously closed it after them.

Once the noises from outside were blocked, a heavy silence filled the darkness that engulfed them. Lorna murmured in a worried voice.

“I was really just observing, I didn’t do anything else…”

“That’s something we’ll find out once we read it.”

“Are you going to use your ability?”

Lorna seemed to have realized the power of Kanna’s abilities in the meantime. Yuder, for the first time, became aware of the fact that Kanna could have such a stern and determined look in her eyes.

“If necessary, I will. Where is ‘it’?”

Lorna sighed and moved deeper into the room. As she stopped somewhere and activated a small magic device, light seeped out, illuminating the surroundings. Only then did Yuder see the small cage in front of them.

Inside the cage made of sturdy iron bars was a small monster the size of a palm, hunkered down, nibbling on something. Seeing the spikes that resembled pine cones attached to its long tail, Yuder finally understood why Kanna had acted as she did. It was the Pethuamet, something they thought they’d never see again. For a

moment, Yuder felt a chill run down his spine, and was unable to say anything.

“…Kanna, why is this monster… why is it still here?”

“There was something I didn’t tell you before.”

Kanna opened her mouth with a stern voice.

Her explanation was brief. Several ingredients were needed for the magic to remove traces of the Amplification circle from Yuder’s body. Initially, they researched using the tongue Yuder had voluntarily given, but that alone was insufficient. Then, Kishiar decided to use the body and tongue of a massive Pethuamet, and it was during this time that Lorna, who had followed them, found this little Pethuamet.

“It must have been a lucky survivor. Fortunately, it hadn’t absorbed any magic or other power yet.”

Lorna thought the pure Pethuamet could be the breakthrough they needed for their solution. She risked her life to convince the others not to kill the monster immediately, and under the supervision of Kishiar and the Knights, she was able to prove that she was right.

The monster, having served its purpose, was scheduled to be disposed of the next day.

“I also agree that disposal is the right thing to do. But considering this situation, I wanted to take one last look. After all, the chance to see a monster capable of absorbing and releasing power won’t come again….”

Lorna quickly interjected.

“So, did you finish your observations?”

“…I’m more than satisfied with the answers we got from this research. I truly have no intention of being greedy.”

Kanna lightly tapped on Lorna’s shoulder. Her stern expression didn’t soften, but the fact that she didn’t utter a word implied that there was some truth to what Lorna had said.

‘A monster that absorbs and expels power… Indeed, they said that because of the amplifier created by the Western Mage Union before, the power was only amplified within it, so it should be able to expel it in a normal state.’

Perhaps the answer that Lorna had found was somehow related to that expelling part. Yuder was watching Pethuameth, who was uninterested in what humans were doing and was chewing on a large leaf. As if sensing his gaze, Pethuameth ceased the movement of his jaw.

‘But if it absorbs by eating, does it expel… through excretion?’

While he was considering this question he had never been curious about before, the small Pethuameth suddenly dropped the leaf it had been holding in its mouth. It began to howl sharply towards the direction where Yuder was, scraping the bars like a four-legged beast. Even though Yuder showed no reaction, Pethuameth didn’t stop the movement of scratching the bars and wagging its tail. As a result, the conversation between Kanna and Lorna came to a pause.

“…Why is it doing that?”

“I don’t know. This is the first time it’s reacted like this.”

“You didn’t do anything to the monster, did you?”

Upon Yuder’s question, Kanna, who was standing beside the flustered mumbling Lorna, lightly touched the bars. It seemed she

was attempting to use her power. Before he could tell her not to, as it was dangerous, an odd expression suddenly surfaced on Kanna's face.

"…Huh?"

In the midst of a tense atmosphere, Kanna turned her head towards the two of them and opened her mouth slowly with an uncertain look.

"I'm not sure if I read it right… but it seems like the monster feels that you, Yuder, are… how should I put it, a similar being."

"… It thinks I'm a similar being? Are you saying I'm a monster?"

"Of course, Yuder, you're a human. You're a human, but… I'll use my power again. Maybe I read it wrong."

"Don't."

But the result was the same. Despite Yuder and Kanna's dumbfounded reactions, the small Pethuameth continued to scratch the bars and made strange sounds. Lorna, who had been watching this, suddenly raised her head as if she realized something.

"Could it be because of the toxin you absorbed?"

Upon hearing this, Yuder turned his gaze towards Lorna, who started to speak rapidly in an excited tone.

"You were able to recover after absorbing the toxic fluid. I speculated once that you probably won't be affected by the same monster's venom in the future. We still know little about how monsters recognize individuals of the same kind, but the stain that remained in your body has not fully healed. If that's why…"

It was a shocking conjecture, but it seemed to be the most plausible explanation given the situation. Yuder, looking down at the monster wagging its tail towards him, shook his head.

"…If I won't be affected by the same monster's venom in the future, that's good news."

From Yuder's perspective, who considered monsters to be his greatest weakness, it was indeed great news.

'Of course, it's uncertain when I'll encounter Pethuameth again, so it may be a moot point.'

"So before you leave, I wanted to ask if you could test the monster's venom…"

Lorna, who was continuing her sentence, promptly closed her mouth under Kanna's gaze.

So far, he had not felt any major changes except for the slow recovery of power, but as she said, there was a possibility that something might have changed without him knowing.

'What a bizarre turn of events…'

"You guys are here."

While he was lost in thought, someone who had come closer unnoticed, let out a voice from behind.

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Chapter 320

“Commander!”

When Kanna raised her voice in surprise, Kishiar revealed himself from the darkness, smiling.

“What were you talking about?”

After Kishiar appeared, Lorna seemed even more intimidated than when she had faced Kanna. Having just heard from Kanna about the events that had just transpired, Kishiar glanced down at Pethuamet, who was still scratching at the iron bars, and then turned his eyes toward Lorna.

“Lorna Beit, do you have anything to add to what Kanna said?”

“…No, I’m sorry.”

“It seems you’ve grown comfortable with yesterday’s success, but I would like you to keep in mind that it is not yet time for such comfort. You still need to learn to discern what you should and shouldn’t say to someone who has just regained their footing.”

“I was… rash.”

Lorna merely bowed her head, offering no excuse. Seeing her trembling fingertips and not daring to look directly at Kishiar’s face, Yuder began to wonder how Kishiar had treated the mages before, to prompt such a reaction.

“Go out and tell Micalin about this.”

“…Yes.”

It was only then that Lorna seemed to breathe again, quickly rising from her seat and leaving. Kishiar did not take his eyes off her until she was completely out of sight. Only after hearing the distant sound of a door closing did he finally turn to face Kanna and Yuder.

“Anyway, about the emotions of a monster… strange information. Have you ever read about this before, Kanna?”

“No, this is my first time hearing of it too. It’s not so much emotions, but more… a feeling that’s hard to explain.”

Kanna explained that the information read from Pethuamet felt more like a powerful instinct, although it was too brief to say definitively. Yuder reached out slowly towards Pethuamet, who was hanging on the iron bars. The creature tilted its body to follow Yuder’s hand and then recoiled, its short legs flailing. Yuder found the scene pathetically reminiscent of the massive Pethuamet. Kishiar also slightly furrowed his brow at the sight.

“It might be dangerous, so come back.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure, as Kanna said, this monster doesn’t seem to harbor any hostility towards me.”

“What should we do?…”

At Kanna’s perplexed question, Kishiar fell into momentary silence. He seemed uncertain whether to immediately eliminate the unknown element or to verify it before moving on.

“Yuder, what do you think, from the subject’s standpoint?”

“I… “

Yuder opened his mouth and then closed it again. Although he was taken aback by the expression of sensing kinship, he realized that there were those in the world who could command monsters

and that more would emerge in the future. What would be so different about this? Thinking of it as an extra ability, he felt surprisingly eager.

‘What if… I could use the power that this Pethuamet has, like those Awakeners who handle monsters?’

Yuder recalled the ability of Pethuamet that Lorna had mentioned.

Absorption of strength, and discharge.

At that moment, a thought suddenly struck his mind, sending shockwaves through his consciousness.

‘Perhaps studying this monster’s ability could help with Kishiar’s vessel problem. Even if not, maybe it could help find answers related to what happened to me after absorbing the power of the Red Stone…’

It was merely a hypothetical scenario. However, Yuder was engulfed by an astonishment so distinct that it made him wonder why he hadn’t thought of it just moments before. It was as though a new path, hitherto unseen, had revealed itself before his eyes. Looking down at the little Pethuamet that squirmed and wriggled along his fingertips, Yuder opened his mouth again.

“If you ask for my opinion, I believe it might be wise to ascertain the correlation between the transformation that occurred to me and this monster before making a decision on its disposal. Wouldn’t it be better than leaving an uncertain element unattended?”

“…”

“Of course, I mean if there’s a way to verify it without risk.”

“Without risk.”

Kishiar, who had quietly responded, turned his gaze toward the cage holding the Pethuamet.

“I agree with not leaving uncertainties, but we’ll have to think about it a bit more.”

They left behind the Pethuamet, crying out with small squeaks, and exited the storeroom. Yuder sensed the inquisitive glances of his comrades but feigned ignorance. Kanna felt the same.

Afterward, Kishiar gathered the rarely assembled members to inform them that he would be leaving tomorrow and that there were changes in the personnel staying in the Great Sarain Forest.

“As you all know, the situation has changed somewhat from what we originally anticipated. Therefore, I will inform you again who will leave for Tainu with me tomorrow and who will stay here to assist in the search and subjugation.”

Originally, including Gakane and the Eldore siblings, several from the second dispatch were to stay here, while Kanna and Emun were to leave for Tainu with Kishiar and Yuder. However, Kishiar removed Ever and Finn Eldore from the list, inserting Kanna instead.

“Kanna Wand will stay here to gather more information about the ‘village’ and then come to Tainu. Ever Beck will accompany us to Tainu and lead those there.”

“Understood.”

To Yuder, the changes in personnel seemed to suggest a shift in focus towards tracking the Star of Nagran and investigating the Magic Spring rather than monster subjugation. The members swallowed their surprise, nodding in agreement without objecting to Kishiar’s decision.

Kishiar ordered everyone except Deputy Commander Ever, Kanna, and Gakane to return to the base. Upon arriving there slightly later than the others, Yuder saw a familiar face.

“Enon?”

“…”

He thought he wouldn’t see Enon among the members who had arrived first and that he would have to go to Tainu to meet him, but he was wrong. The man who had been reluctant to leave the capital sat with a few Peletta Knights, his face as cold as ice. Upon seeing Yuder, he immediately scowled.

“You… what on earth happened to you?”

Enon, who had risen from his seat, pulled Yuder upstairs before anyone could say a word.

“This is madness. This is what you call healing? Where’s Lusan? Lead the way.”

“Priest Lusan is lying down right now; he’s not feeling well.”

“What? Why?”

Clearly, he hadn’t received a detailed explanation of what had happened that day. As Yuder explained what had occurred to Lusan, Enon’s expression grew even grimmer.

“It’s one thing after another. Damn it all.”

“I heard the Commander called you, but I really didn’t expect you to come all the way here.”

“What was I supposed to do when those knight bastards rushed in, saying you were all dying, and threw me into a carriage without warning?”

Hearing the details, it was clear that Enon had not come with the second dispatched unit. Yet, if he had arrived almost at the same time, one could only imagine how hastily he must have rushed. Enon, seemingly bearing great resentment towards Kishiar, headed towards Lusan's room, constantly muttering curses under his breath.

"S-Sir Enon…? When did you arrive?"

Lusan, who had been lying down with a pale face, jumped up in surprise, but Enon held his shoulder down. After examining Lusan's condition, he clicked his tongue and pulled out a few medicinal pills from his pocket to hand over.

"He really did a number on you. Take all of these, and don't use your divine power for a few days."

"I'm sorry. As a Priest, I've lost face."

"It's fine. Just rest."

After taking the medicine Enon provided, Lusan fell asleep quickly. They settled down in a spot where they could keep an eye on the sleeping Lusan. Yuder felt Enon's eyes scanning his face, eyes, and even inside, and opened his mouth.

"Enon. Remember the thread you gave me?"

"…Why?"

"It was severed this time. I couldn't figure out its meaning, so I wanted to ask…"

Enon was silent for a moment. When he opened his mouth again, his eyes had sharpened.

"As I told you before, it was a kind of amulet. It absorbed and dispersed any shock that would shake the holder's power and soul.

So, if it’s broken, it means you endured a shock of that magnitude.”

It seemed to imply that he had almost died from this incident, but part of it was not easily accepted.

“It didn’t feel that dangerous.”

“It didn’t feel that dangerous? I heard some of it on the way here, but you must really be insane.”

Enon, who had coldly deemed Yuder mad, exhaled as he stared into space, seemingly trying not to lose his temper.

“I told you before. No matter how good your innate talent is, there are limits. If you’ve come this far, is it your wish to die young?”

“Didn’t I tell you I still don’t believe it?”

“Do you think it matters whether you believe it or not right now?”

Enon, suddenly angry, took a few deep breaths again.

“How on earth did I get entangled with someone like you…? It’s driving me crazy.”

“…I’m sorry for that.”

“If you were truly sorry, you wouldn’t have done something like this.”

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Without restraint, Enon finally withdrew his piercing gaze only after thoroughly examining Yuder's hand, where the black stains hadn't completely disappeared. Seizing the opportunity, Yuder filled Enon in on his condition as Kishiar and Lusan had speculated. Enon only heaved a cold sigh in response to the explanation that it was recovery to this point after the magic to remove the traces of amplification succeeded.

"How long will it take for my power to fully recover, do you think?"

"Do you think I'm some sort of god? How would I know all that?"

Though he spoke those words, Enon opened his mouth again a moment later with a sullen face.

"You said your body improved after the magic succeeded, so I suppose our Commander's thoughts on this won't be too far off. But unless there's been another case like this, who would've experienced such a thing?"

Hence, Enon stated that no one could guarantee what would become of Yuder's body from here on.

"The pure power, like a poison existing within your body, that absorbs or repels outside forces, indeed seems to be continuously influencing you. To reduce the variables and ensure your condition, the body's owner must behave, but knowing you, that seems unlikely."

"…"

"Please, try to live more sensibly. Are you the only one in the Cavalry who does any work? No, with your personality, you'd

probably insist on doing everything yourself, no matter what your friends or colleagues do to stop you.”

Enon looked at Yuder with a mixed expression of irritation, sympathy, doubt, and a strange sense of realization, his words striking with precision as if he had read what the Cavalry’s comrades had been saying.

“So, what was the reason for this action? Was it simply because you seemed to be the only one who could deal with that monster? Or was it related to your ‘goal’?”

Yuder did not respond immediately, maintaining silence before finally nodding heavily.

“Yes. I thought you would answer like that.”

“…”

“Was it such a dangerous monster? So much so that it had to be killed right then and there?”

“If I waited longer, it would’ve been too late. I had to deal with it alone when I could. Otherwise…”

Yuder’s words trailed off, his gaze falling downward. All the disasters caused by the massive Pethuamet in his previous life flashed vividly in his mind once again. The shattered west, the stain of resentment and suffering on the Cavalry, and then.

The back of Kishiar, wavering on the breaking cliff.

“…It would have been too late to turn back.”

Yuder erased the events that would never occur again from his mind.

“That’s why I’m not regretting even after ending up like this.”

Enon murmured with wide-open eyes as if he had finally found some answers, a strange energy seeming to emanate from beyond his gaze.

“Now I think I understand what you meant by the ‘non-personal’ goal.”

No answer was returned. It seemed there was no need.

“…Then… No. I thought it was not yet time, but no, maybe not.”

Muttering under his breath, Enon eventually fell silent, his forehead and eyes furrowed. Yuder waited for him to open his mouth again, but instead of speaking, Enon, who had risen from his seat, handed him something.

“…Take this.”

“…This thread, how many do you have?”

“This is all I have now!”

Enon, who handed over a new thread similar to the one that had become ashes and had been cut off, exclaimed nervously. His appearance, which had seemed confused just a moment ago, had now returned to his usual demeanor.

“Don’t break it again. I brought this just in case, so there won’t be a next time.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“Not try, say you understand!”

“Thanks, Enon.”

Whether he had no words left for Yuder’s curt expression of gratitude, Enon simply pressed his forehead and replied, “That’s

enough.” To calm him down, Yuder proposed visiting the Magic Spring Ruins before leaving this place. But the response he got pointed out an unexpected aspect.

“The mages here thought that was the Magic Spring?”

“The Commander said it wouldn’t be.”

“Of course not.”

Enon answered concisely and heaved a sigh towards the void, as if baffled.

“The Magic Spring isn’t… like, a real spring. Even though the concentration of magic power has been getting thinner recently, and the level of mages has dropped, to have such a misconception. I don’t know when the magic power began to pool here, but in my eyes, it was clearly artificially created.”

“…By human hands?”

“Natural forces don’t gather abnormally like this. The pure power that sustains the world has neither form nor will. Just as water can’t stop if there’s no place to pool, it means that someone must have dug the ground here to make the magic power gather.”

“Who could it be?”

“I don’t know. Probably some greedy human common everywhere.”

Enon said no more. His face looked as though he regretted speaking, yet also as though he did not. For the first time, Yuder felt within his familiar yet unfamiliar expression, a weariness like that of a truly aged elder.

On the surface, Enon might seem nothing but young and not at all dangerous, but what was his true nature? What is a guardian? How much does Yuder not know about him, and will there be another chance in this life to learn the answer?

As Yuder hesitated and was about to call his name, Enon abruptly turned and said, “Let’s go.”

“Don’t worry about useless things and take care of yourself.”

And then he was gone, as swiftly as the wind. His resolute back seemed not to allow any more questions.

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The next day, Yuder rose at dawn and went outside. Outside the base, fellow members who would accompany him, a few members of the Pelleta Knight, those who had come to see them off, and a pile of already stacked luggage awaited.

“Yuder.”

Amid the cold dawn air filled with mist, Gakane approached and lightly tapped Yuder’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry I can’t go with you. Rest well until we meet again in Tainu, and take your treatment seriously. I’ll send you letters, so reply. And… remember what you said to me before?”

“The appointment offer?”

“Yeah. That. It’s still valid… right?”

Yuder nodded, looking into Gakane’s green eyes, which seemed mixed with excitement and tension.

“It’s valid.”

Then Gakane finally smiled brightly, clenching his fist. The crisp dawn air made his reddened hair look even more vibrant. His appearance naturally justified the nickname ‘Living Rose.’

“Good. I’m going to do a perfect job here, so look forward to it.”

“By the way, I forgot to mention something back then, but success isn’t the only thing that counts as doing well in a mission.”

“Huh?”

Yuder responded softly to the handsome man who opened his eyes wide.

“Sometimes, the best outcome is when everyone is safe, even if we fail.”

“What are you talking about? If anything, that’s what I should be saying to you!”

Gakane burst out laughing.

“It seems you’ve learned a lot from being seriously injured this time. Yuder even said all these things.”

“It’s no joke.”

“Yeah, I understand. I’ll do my best to make sure everyone returns without injury.”

Gakane eagerly shook hands with Yuder, clearly in high spirits. Following him, Kanna, who appeared a little later, spoke to Yuder, echoing similar words.

“Yuder, heed the Commander’s words, and never overdo it. I’m worried that your eye should be fully healed when we meet in Tainu…”

Yuder faintly smiled at Kanna, who was looking worriedly at his still unrecovered left eye. Meanwhile, as he earnestly replied to the words of Jimmy and other members who remained there, an unexpected new person approached Yuder.

“Excuse me for a moment.”

As Micalin, cloaked in a mage’s robe, intervened, the Cavalry members quickly withdrew, adopting a nervous stance.

“What is the matter, Leader?”

“You’ve suffered a lot on our behalf here, so I must pay proper respects.”

However, Micalin couldn’t easily speak. The old mage, who scanned the black stain left on his forehead and his left eye for a long time, sighed deeply and bowed his head.

“I, Micalin Punt, will never forget the immense favor I owe you for this incident. I’m truly thankful for saving me and our union mages. If a day comes when you need help, contact me anytime.”

“…I didn’t do it to erase a debt.”

“That’s why it’s even more embarrassing. I know it’s not so.”

Micalin said that he himself would go to Tainu soon, and if Yuder ever came to the Western Mage Union there, he would entertain him. Although Yuder wondered if he would ever contact them again, he said nothing.

“Ah, and about the magic spell that succeeded this time.”

As talk of magic suddenly emerged, the eyes of the surrounding watching Cavalry members simultaneously turned fierce. Micalin continued, a little sheepishly.

“When a new magic spell is completed, it must be given an official name to report to the academic community… If you agree, I’d like to name this magic spell ‘Yuder No. 1’ after you.”

He asked what Yuder thought, adding that naming a new magic spell was considered a great honor. But honestly, from Yuder’s point of view, it was none of his business.

“…Do you have to use my name? Are there no other candidates?”

“I won’t force it if you don’t like it, but other candidates… hmm.”

Micalin’s eyes shifted more subtly.

“Names like ‘Black Death’s Anomaly Destruction Magic’ or ‘Malignant Infinite Amplification Addiction Removal Technique’ are a bit too much, don’t you think?”

For a moment, Yuder doubted his ears. The expressions of the other members changed to ones of astonishment as well. Amidst their inability to speak easily, a soft yet cold voice intervened from the fog.

“To be honest, I find all three options strange, but among them, ‘Yuder No. 1’ seems best.”

“Commander.”

Kishiar was dressed in a smooth black fur cloak that reflected light like flowing water, and ash-gray gloves. On one of his shoulders, there were two silver ornamental pins, each engraved with the crest of the Peletta Ducal House and the Cavalry. Unlike when he concealed his identity by covering his face, his appearance now conveyed a concise yet definite intention to reveal himself. With a new sword added to his waist, he looked as though he could be believed to be the second coming of an Emperor from legend.

Upon the Commander's appearance, Yuder turned his head, watching his suddenly energized colleagues with slight consternation. The red eyes met his, seeming to have been waiting for this moment, and sparkled with a pretty smile.

"How about it? Opportunities to leave one's name in history aren't common."

"If that's the Commander's opinion, then I'm fine with it."

"Then let's make it 'Yuder No. 1.'"

Micalin quickly made the decision. Kishiar watched the retreating figure of the old mage, a smile playing at the corners of his lips.

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“Mages have always been notoriously bad at naming. If it’s going to be a strange name anyway, it’s better to leave your name in it.”

“…”

“Isn’t it cold? It’s quite chilly.”

“I’m fine.”

“Did you rest well last night? There were many things to check again before leaving, and I regret not having had the chance to look them over. Ah, I also received a report that the pharmacist Enon has arrived. Did you meet him?”

“Yes, I met him. I rested well at night, too.”

The excessively sweet voice was bothersome, but fortunately, no one around seemed to be paying much attention to their conversation. Yuder hesitated for a moment before cautiously speaking.

“Did you rest well last night, Commander?”

“No.”

Kishiar’s eyes sparkled as if they had been waiting for those words.

“So when we join up with Nathan and get on the wagon, I plan to catch some sleep there.”

“Ah, yes. That’s good.”

“There’s no need to move quickly like on the way here, so it worked out well. You know that you must ride with me, don’t you?”

“I… didn’t know.”

“Don’t forget it now.”

Yuder blinked silently, and Kishiar laughed lightly.

“Isn’t there anything else you’re curious about besides whether I rested well? I thought you’d ask by now.”

‘Ah.’

Only then did Yuder remember something he’d momentarily forgotten, mesmerized by Kishiar’s appearance.

“… What have you decided to do with that monster from yesterday?”

He should have asked this first, but he forgot. Kishiar elegantly gestured toward a pile of luggage.

“Do you see that box wrapped in black cloth?”

“Yes. …Have you decided to take it with us?”

“I’ve summoned some people from Tainu who know about monsters. We’ll examine it properly there and then decide how to dispose of it.”

His decisive voice was impeccably clear.

“The Mages will think we’ve discarded it, so keep it a secret even in Tainu.”

He lightly brushed Yuder’s left eyelid and turned away.

As the time to depart drew near, the Cavalry members shared their farewells, each filled with regret. For the first time, the Eldore siblings, who were separated by this incident, couldn't hide their gloom, and Ever was worried about young Jimmy, who would stay behind. However, Jimmy was excited and his cheeks flushed at the thought of carrying out an extermination mission in the vast Great Sarain Forest.

Yuder glanced up at the Western Mage Union's base building one last time. He didn't feel particularly sorry, but the fact that no one here had died this time gave him considerable satisfaction. Savoring the sensation, which seemed to warm his previously unnoticed hungry stomach, Yuder turned away.

The small base soon disappeared, hidden by the lush green forest of Great Sarain Forest.

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"My lord! We finally have news from the Great Sarain Forest region."

Tainu's Lord Baron Willhem sprung up at the call, his eyes rolling anxiously.

"Is that so? Did they handle the base matter well? The Duke of Peletta? No, what about the Cavalry and those Western Mage Union rascals? And why was the news so delayed? I clearly told them to contact me at least once a week!"

Baron Willhem had never felt so impatient in his life. Recently, a series of events had befallen him, all of which seemed unbearably harsh for someone who had lived diligently without fault.

Without warning, the Cavalry member, known as Yuder, suddenly appeared in the Great Sarain Forest and silently vanquished the massive monster that had strangely emerged. That much could be

accepted. But why was Duke Peletta Kishiar, who was supposed to be in the capital, present there? And why had the Western Mage Union not interfered with them?

Ever since Emperor Keilusa boasted of the achievements of the Yuder and Duke Peletta, Baron Willhem's days had been as painful as sitting on a bed of thorns. Day after day, angry messages mixed with rage from Duke Tain, blaming his incompetence, came flying his way, and the nobles and commoners of the west resented the house of Tain for not stopping the monster in time. Naturally, as the fame of the Emperor, Duke Peletta, and the Yuder grew, the blame and finger-pointing were directed at Baron Willhem, who managed Tainu.

Adding to his troubles, the knights sent late to defend the honor of the house of Tain did not even report properly, and his anxiety reached its peak. He spent his days in fretful anticipation, waiting for letters, often lashing out in anger at anyone within reach.

He hoped that Duke Peletta truly did not possess the divine sword. He wished that the news of the giant monster was nothing but an exaggerated rumor, and that in reality, the situation had been a complete disaster, resulting in many deaths. The secret trading post of the house of Tain should never have caught their eyes.

However, the expression of his attendant, who stood before him with the newly arrived news, was as pale as a ghost. Seeing his hand holding two letters trembling, Baron Willhem, filled with anxiety, commanded him to read quickly.

"M-My Lord, the knights we dispatched to the Great Sarain Forest… That is…"

"What is it? Don't tell me they discovered our trading post?"

The truth within the first letter, read in the attendant's faltering voice, was worse than that. Baron Willhem was shocked to learn that all three knights he had sent were killed in an ambush, and that

Yuder, who had recovered the bodies, had sent the results of their investigation in a letter. He fainted momentarily from the shock.

Upon awakening, he learned from the next letter, which he hadn't fully heard, that the Commander of the Cavalry, Yuder, and other Cavalry members were planning to come to Tainu together. He fainted once again.

None of the things he had wished for had come true. Baron Willhem, a devout follower of the Sun God, lay cursing the deity's indifference, but he was scarcely allowed any rest. This was because of the command sent by the Duke of Tain.

'*Chase the audacious Awakeners who dared to kill the knights of the house of Tain and stole their belongings. Using the stolen information, they will surely go to the Tain's middle trading post if they intend to harm us. And somehow invite Duke Peletta to find out how much of the rumors about the divine sword or Yuder are true, and what they know about our secret trade.*'

The stern command from the Duke of Tain contained a threat that Willhem's safety could not be guaranteed if he failed again. Though it angered him that the duke only gave commands without providing the necessary manpower or funds, he had no choice.

"My Lord, Yuder and the Peletta Knights have just passed through the city gates. They will arrive here soon, so please prepare yourself."

"Understood."

Baron Willhem, his face having grown haggard in just a few days, dressed himself and went outside. He planned to meet Duke Peletta first and, under the guise of thanking him for the achievements of Yuder in the Great Sarain Forest, invite him to his mansion.

But when the horses and carriages that had run across the road stopped in front of him, and those who seemed to know nothing of courtesy or decorum clambered out, even the astute Baron Willhem could not help but become momentarily dazed.

“Ah, thought I was going to drop dead from exhaustion. Finally, we can take a rest!”

“Is this Tainu?”

“I’m a bit thirsty now… Where’s the bathroom?”

Oh, God. Were these filthy and rude commoners really all members of the Cavalry? No matter how much he railed against it, the scene before his eyes remained unchanged. Standing behind Baron Willhem, the priests and knights could not hide their discomfort and confusion as an unusually striking tall man disembarked from the carriage.

He stood a full head taller than even the well-built knights, but his movements were more graceful, and he possessed a beauty that captured one’s attention and would not let go. As Baron Willhem watched the man brush back his windblown hair and slowly close his red eyes, he found himself unexpectedly entranced and let out a subconscious sigh.

‘I can’t believe it. That man is the very same dissolute Duke…’

Up to now, the most representative information Baron Willhem had about Duke Peletta was stories of him being a dissolute and foolish Duke. Up until now, he hadn’t found the other parts of his character even worthy of consideration.

But the man before his eyes was so radiant and overwhelming. Was he truly the problem child of the imperial family, that had been said by the Duke of Tain to be unworthy of serious consideration?

While Baron Willhem was lost in confusion, another person exited the carriage from which Duke Peletta had emerged. This one was a particularly pale youth with bloodless skin, only noticeable by his exceptionally black hair.

‘Who is that? A servant… or an aide?’

In Baron Willhem’s wonderment, the youth turned his head and looked straight at him. Baron Willhem felt a chill run down his spine as he met the gaze of that one eye covered in black spots. It was an eye that simultaneously drew and repelled attention, displaying an outstanding ability to induce discomfort.

As Baron Willhem unwittingly averted his eyes, the youth spoke to Duke Peletta, who then purposefully strode towards where Baron Willhem stood. The rowdy Cavalry members quieted as he moved.

“Are you Baron Willhem?”

“Yes, I am… Joseph Willhem. It is an honor to meet you, Your Grace.”

Though he stumbled a little, Baron Willhem managed to greet the Duke with practiced etiquette.

“I hear from the guards at the gate that you wished to meet us.”

“Yes. You have come a long way from Great Sarain Forest to Tainu; how could I, as the lord, remain idle? On behalf of all the citizens of the Empire on the western border who can now sleep peacefully thanks to Your Grace and the Cavalry, I wish to express my gratitude. I beseech you to accept it.”

There had been no slip of the tongue so far. Baron Willhem reviewed his words and looked up from his reverent gaze. Kishiar was watching him with an inscrutable face. In truth, even before the Cavalry’s arrival, he hadn’t expected this proposal to be rejected. But

now, seeing Duke Peletta's face in person, he felt uncertain and inwardly conflicted. If such a thing did happen, what could he say to the Duke of Tain?

Baron Willhem clutched at his racing heart as if in joy, scrutinizing the parting lips of Kishiar. And the next moment, the exceedingly elegant and beautiful man transformed into a serene face that appeared devoid of any thoughts, nodding and smiling broadly.

"Excellent! I've been worrying about where to sleep, so I'm truly thankful for your offer. Isn't that right, assistant?"

"Yes."

As the Duke asked, his arm casually draped around the shoulder of a black-haired man standing beside him, the man silently nodded in reply.

"Make sure to accept that favor."

"…"

Baron Willhem's first impression of the Duke of Peletta, who was considered to be very difficult contrary to rumors, noisily collapsed at that moment.

"I've gathered quite a bit of fatigue on the way. I'd like the evening meal to be prepared monastically… Ah, are you planning a party, too? Then I'll need to prepare new attire. Where will I be staying?"

"Ah, the… the guest house… has been prepared."

Still unable to completely detach himself from the discrepancy between his initial impression and reality, Baron Willhem clumsily responded, to which Kishiar chuckled and nodded.

“The guest house! That’s good. It should be tolerable. I don’t have many people in my current retinue, but personally, I don’t like cramped spaces. Too much external attention and interference are bothersome. I trust you’ll understand.”

“Ye, yes… I understand.”

“Ha ha ha. I get the feeling that you and I will get along quite well.”

Kishiar burst into an endlessly light-hearted laugh, his eyes twinkling. If not for his appearance that seemed to fit anything he did, his attitude would have been so frivolous that he might have been dismissed at once. Baron Willhem remained stunned even after they had been led away to the guest house and disappeared, only snapping to attention after quite some time at the call of his attendant. A massive shock and relief had simultaneously struck his head.

“…My lord. Are you alright?”

“Heh. The rumors were not wrong at all.”

“Yes?”

“It’s nothing.”

Baron Willhem offered his thanks to God with a lighter heart. He secretly commanded those who were attending the Duke of Peletta and the cavalry not to miss anything that they said or did.

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Chapter 323

“Look at the dishes in this display cabinet. The gold trim is quite beautiful, isn’t it? They must be very expensive.”

“I saw some dishes just like these in another place earlier. They’re so plain. Want to go count how many identical ones are here? It’ll be quick if we use the wind ability.”

“Sounds fun!”

“Why are there so many paintings of people here? I’d be too scared to come in at night, fearing making eye contact.”

The Cavalry members’ behavior as they explored the lavishly decorated mansion was bolder, brighter, and noisier than ever before. Watching the confused servants of the Willhem family scurrying around after them, Yuder felt a sense of deja vu from a visit to the Apeto Duke’s mansion.

‘Back then, the servants couldn’t hide their contemptuous glances at the Cavalry members.’

Perhaps the reason the members were acting rowdier than necessary was that they felt those disdainful looks. Did they really need to show good behavior to those who would look down on them, whether the Cavalry members were behaving or showing more courtesy than nobles?

Comparing the present with the early days of entering the service, when they were intimidated before the Imperial Knights, Yuder swallowed his satisfaction, thinking it was truly a significant advancement.

“Yuder, shouldn’t we go see the Commander soon? It seems like it’s about time.”

Sitting beside him, Ever, who had been wearing a refreshing expression, whispered in his ear. Yuder estimated the time and nodded, rising from his seat.

“…That’s right. I’ll go ahead.”

“Good luck. Your role in this matter is the most important, after all.”

Ever waved with a grin that was irresistibly joyful. Yuder let out a small sigh and turned his back.

Kishiar had predicted almost exactly the behavior of Duke Tain and Baron Willhem before coming to Tainu and planned to use it. The Tain family would think they were keeping the Cavalry members close and using Kishiar, but in fact, it was the opposite.

Kishiar was acting openly dissolute as Duke Peletta to lower the Tain family’s guard and facilitate his later plans. To others, this behavior seemed rather like the well-known Duke Peletta, leaving no room for suspicion.

The only problem was that Kishiar wasn’t the only one who had to act. No matter how wantonly Kishiar behaved, it was futile if his companions didn’t support him, so everyone had been assigned their roles just before arriving at Tainu.

The Cavalry members had the role of a ‘commoner group,’ freely wandering the annex and thoroughly unnerving Baron Willhem and his servants. The Peletta Knights were assigned to loiter unnoticeably, lowering the surrounding vigilance. Yuder’s role was entirely different from the others.

He saw the Tain family's servants gathered in front of Kishiar's nearby lodging. They were at a loss, neither daring to open the closed door nor leave, but they cleared the way, wearing strange expressions when they saw Yuder.

With looks mingled with fear, curiosity, and faint contempt, Yuder silently knocked on the closed door.

"Commander, I'm here."

"A person claiming to be me? Who am I, then?"

"…It's Yuder Aile."

At that, the closed door opened, and Kishiar poked his face out. The dazzling smile he blatantly displayed was so bright that it seemed to make the surroundings lose their light momentarily.

"Oh, my! My adorable assistant has finally arrived. Well, then, I can't not let you in. Come in, quickly."

"I, I… Your Grace. Baron Willhem has conveyed a message for… Your Grace!"

The servants of the Tain house who had gathered around were calling Kishiar desperately, but he calmly ignored their voices, gripping Yuder's waist and pulling him close. Yuder read clear astonishment in the eyes he met just before the door closed. A complicated emotion welled up inside him, and at the same time, Kishiar burst into bright laughter after looking at Yuder's expression.

"What's with that face?"

"…I was thinking whether it's really okay for me to play this role."

"Oh come on. I thought we all agreed on the necessity and purpose of the role of a cute lover to whom the lecherous Duke of

Peletta is showing keen interest? If we remove some strange words from that, sure, I agreed. But that's because I didn't think I would be the one playing that role."

In the carriage on the way to Tainu, Kishiar had said that it wouldn't be difficult to portray the 'lecherous dissolute Duke of Peletta' that was rumored, but there was one problem. When asked what it was, the answer was that he would have to play with strangers whose identity was unknown.

"It's not only a waste of time but also highly dangerous. You never know who might approach with ill intent."

It made sense. However, leaving that part out wouldn't be in line with the character of the Duke of Peletta in the rumors. Therefore, Kishiar suggested adding the role of 'someone acting like a lover who is currently receiving much attention from the Duke of Peletta', and Yuder had reluctantly agreed.

The next day, Kishiar handed over that role to Yuder Aile in front of everyone. When Yuder protested, Kishiar silenced him with a perfectly reasonable explanation.

"There's no one better suited for this role than my constant companion. If I chose someone else, I would have to deliberately exclude other people around me, including my assistant, which would be bad for the progress of the plan. Also, once they know your true identity, they will start watching and attempting to trap you. By accepting this role, you could easily avoid such annoyances and dangers."

The fact that Yuder was a man wasn't a reason to refuse. Everyone knew well what Kishiar's and his second gender were, and since they were different, it would be better for embellishing the situation, and it would be easier to correct the facts afterward using the primary gender. Yuder was silent for a long time, looking at Kishiar, who calmly stated that everything had worked out well.

Yuder didn’t know when Kishiar had started planning this, but it was utterly foolproof.

However, to perform such a role while not holding hands with the other party in the present relationship seemed too cunning. It was even more so when he thought of their relationship in his previous life that Kishiar would not know about. But excluding those personal reasons, which he couldn’t tell anyone, Kishiar’s choice was highly efficient. That was the biggest problem.

Kishiar finally said that he would change his mind if anyone else volunteered, but of course, no one did until they arrived at Tainu.

And so, Yuder ended up with the single unique role.

‘I was wondering what I would have to do since he was so confident that there was no need for me to do anything special on my side, but…’

Kishiar’s ability to control the reactions around him with slight changes in expression and small gestures was outstanding. Looking at the faces of the servants they had encountered earlier, it seemed that even if Yuder did nothing, everything would go according to that man’s intention.

“By dinnertime, the rumors should have spread nicely. I’m looking forward to seeing Baron Willhem’s expression at the feast.”

Baron Willhem from Yuder’s previous life had died fleeing when the western area suffered heavy damage from monsters, so this was the first time anyone had actually seen his face. Yuder thought he looked remarkably weak for someone who had meddled with the Western Mage Union and Cavalry in order to profit, despite being a cunning schemer.

“When may I leave from here?”

“The servants of Baron Willhem are still waiting outside, so it’s not wise to leave too soon. How about we have some tea together?”

“I understand. But do you intend to keep ignoring their summons? From what I heard earlier, it seems they have come to convey Baron Willhem’s message.”

“It’s a request to come to the banquet with the person I’m designating. Probably wants to gauge my intentions by sending his family. It’s not even worth responding to.”

There was nothing more to say. Yuder sat down as Kishiar suggested and they drank tea together. Even if it was to kill time, he later thought that consuming most of the many refreshments on the table by himself was a bit excessive, but Kishiar didn’t seem to mind at all.

“Would you like to eat more?”

“No, I’m fine.”

He probably wouldn’t be able to eat much for dinner due to consuming so many refreshments. After judging that enough time had passed, Yuder rose from his seat to leave. Kishiar opened his mouth, striking a pose befitting a stubborn duke, resting his chin on his hand.

“Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“Before you go, I want to make one thing clear.”

“Please, speak.”

“The ensuing scandal is entirely my responsibility.”

A nonchalant word made Yuder's mind stop for a moment. He couldn't take his eyes off Kishiar's smiling red lips, listening to the words that followed.

"No matter how much a role is just a role, and not real, it may be perceived differently by those who might misunderstand. I'll bear all responsibility for it. So don't even think about it, or accept anything else."

Yuder couldn't remember what response he gave to those words. When he came to his senses, he was already outside.

The two or three servants who had not given up and were still waiting outside the door were astonished and averted their eyes at the sight of Yuder. If their previous gaze had been one of fear and curious admiration towards the awakened commoner, this one clearly revealed a primary-colored curiosity on top of that.

However, that only brushed by Yuder momentarily. Watching the sticky glances that were shot past the door behind him, Yuder felt as though he had realized the meaning of what Kishiar had just said.

'Did he seriously say that I don't need to do anything on my end…?'

In the blink of an eye, his doubts turned to confusion, and his confusion to a numb emotion. Suddenly, an old memory that had tediously followed him from his previous life to now went pale. The old and rough resentment that never completely disappeared, even when suppressed, lost its place and wandered restlessly, but Yuder could not turn to look at them.

Even after the frightened servants had slowly disappeared from Kishiar's door, Yuder stood for a long time, dumbfounded, staring at the ground.

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Chapter 324

Baron Willhem had prepared a sumptuous evening banquet in the spacious hall of his estate, and attendees were expected to include not only the Willhem family but also the day's guest of honor, Duke Peletta, the Cavalry that he had brought with him, and a few other members of the Peletta Knights, as well as several nobles. Most of them were long-standing residents in the west, people from ancient families who had been troubled by monsters appearing in the borderlands for some time.

Originally, the Baron had planned to go along with them, feigning praise for Duke Peletta to lighten the mood. But Willhem's mood was far from comfortable. He looked down at the ceremoniously prepared banquet dishes, recalling the news he had heard from the servants, news that he could hardly put in his mouth.

'Duke Peletta called one of the Cavalry members into his room in broad daylight… and it was a man at that.'

Baron Willhem's respectful suggestion had been ignored without even a response, and the Duke had pulled a young man into his arms in front of the servants and spent a long time alone with him. When the servants went in afterward to clean the room, they found the Duke lying on the disheveled bed, his clothes loosened, drunk. From the scattered bottles and wine-stained sheets, it was impossible not to guess what had occurred inside.

According to the servants, the man had been personally led to the annex by the Duke when he first arrived. His name was not yet known, but it was certain that his position was that of an assistant.

'How could such a disgraceful thing happen…? I've heard rumors that he's lascivious, laying his hands on anyone, but how could he

do such a thing with a commoner man here, right upon arrival!'

Baron Willhem speculated that this so-called assistant was likely nothing more than a catamite placed in his position to please Kishiar's eye. While there were nobles who were attracted to men, there was no precedent for someone doing it so blatantly. How could an imperial family member, with the blood of God, do such a thing? The mere thought made his stomach turn.

"My Lord, Duke Peletta and the Cavalry, along with the Peletta Knights, will be arriving soon. Please prepare yourself."

Baron Willhem forced his face to relax upon hearing the servant's whisper that Duke Peletta and the Cavalry were coming. In reality, the banquet should have started by now, but everyone had been waiting awkwardly due to their unexplained delay. The Baroness, dressed in her finest gown to receive the guests, was full of dissatisfaction and anger about the situation.

"My love, it is the first day, and we must show our gratitude, but you don't intend to let them stay in the annex the whole time, do you? For the sake of our children, we must not."

Between the Baron and Baroness Willhem, there were two daughters. The Baron, worried that the notorious rake Duke Peletta might inappropriately touch his daughters, had strongly warned them to be cautious. However, now that he knew the Duke's licentiousness was even worse than anticipated, he had no idea what to do.

He would have liked to ask Duke Peletta to leave as soon as possible, but the eye of Duke Tain and the opinions of those around him were against him. After all, the Cavalry were currently heroes, defending the west on behalf of the Tain family.

"…Duke Tain has asked us to keep a close eye on Duke Peletta and the Cavalry, and to plot accordingly, so there's no choice in the

matter. Ensure that the children never approach the annex, and you too, be careful.”

“But…”

“Others are watching. Be mindful of your words.”

The Baroness, who was about to vent her dissatisfaction, caught sight of the other nobles watching them with curious eyes, and closed her mouth. At that moment, a voice rang out announcing the arrival of the Duke of Peletta and the Cavalry.

All the nobles rose from their seats and behaved with decorum. Many people had entered, but there was no need to ask who among them was the Duke of Peletta Kishiar La Orr; it was unmistakably clear. Watching the faces of the other nobles go blank at the sight of him, Baron Wilhelm momentarily forgot even the shameful behavior of a short while ago, thinking them all fools.

Nevertheless, it was indeed true that Kishiar was a breathtakingly handsome man. Looking at his neat attire and elegant smile, no one would guess he had engaged in such disgraceful acts just a few hours earlier. But Baron Wilhelm noticed Kishiar’s slightly flushed cheeks and thought that the rumor of him being drunk was probably true. Suddenly, he felt nauseated, and the handsome face no longer seemed so appealing.

‘Where is that assistant?’

Baron Wilhelm quickly shifted his gaze and found the man Kishiar had been dragging around since midday. The black-haired Cavalry member with a dark spot in one eye was standing silently right next to Kishiar, dressed no differently from the other members.

He was unmistakably masculine, and taller than expected. When he first came to the mansion, Wilhelm thought he looked repulsive, but now he didn’t seem so bad. In any case, what was certain was

that he did not look like someone who had played with men, unlike the Duke of Peletta. Although the shadowed, long eyes, pale lips, and pale neck visible through the collar somehow stimulated a feeling of decadence, that was all there was to it. If Baron Wilhelm had seen him without any prejudice, he would probably remember him as a tolerable commoner youth.

Then, the man seemed to notice Baron Wilhelm's gaze and turned his head, causing the Baron to hastily look away. He approached the Duke of Peletta, praising his extraordinary appearance, and led him to the head seat.

As the other invited nobles greeted the Duke of Peletta, thanking him profusely for the great favor through this occasion, the Duke smiled as though extremely pleased. The fact that he was a licentious man with unnatural affections was truly repulsive, but everything was going according to plan, so it was fortunate. Baron Wilhelm took a deep breath and began to speak to Kishiar, who had started his meal.

"As you requested, we've prepared a traditional capital dish. Does it suit your taste?"

"It's not bad. But for a traditional capital style, you should have applied spiced oil both inside and outside while roasting the duck. This one's only applied on the outside, so the crispiness is a bit lacking."

The Duke of Peletta's face, smiling as though a new experience was acceptable, seemed to mock Baron Wilhelm as a country bumpkin. Wilhelm, with a trembling smile, made excuses that he had given proper instructions, but the chef must have forgotten. He felt the eyes of other nobles, smirking subtly, and anger welled up within him. He resolved to whip the unfortunate chef later and ordered a precious bottle of wine he had prepared in advance.

“Then please have this. It is a special Lyung wine from the West, made 15 years ago during a particularly good year. It’s one of only a few bottles. How is it?”

“I’ve heard of the fame. May I drink something so precious?”

“Of course. In the west, when drinking Lyung wine, a little sugar and salt are dipped into the glass. It’s a good combination that makes the taste even cleaner.”

Baron Willhem had just failed, and was determined to make amends by pouring the alcohol directly into the glass. Kishiar took a sip and praised it as a drink worthy of its name. But what he did next was something no one had expected.

“Yuder, will you try it? The taste is quite good.”

The black-haired man sitting right next to Kishiar, his assistant, raised his head. He had been quietly eating, so the other nobles, who had paid him no attention, were taken aback by the sudden focus on him.

“I’m fine.”

“I’ve already confirmed that there’s no poison by drinking it myself. Don’t refuse, come on.”

Despite the refusal, Kishiar shamelessly held the glass to his assistant’s lips. It would not have been surprising if he had been told to serve with separate glass, but offering a drunk glass to someone was a very secretive and hot act, something done only in bed. Even Baron Willhem had never done so, even with his wife! It was clear from the looks of the surrounding nobles, their expressions irrepressibly changed, that they were also in no condition to manage their shock.

He quickly ordered someone to bring another glass before the black-haired man could drink it and make the situation irreversible. In no time, the precious drink, of which there was only one bottle in Baron Willhem's house, was placed before the commoner.

"Your Grace seems…to value your subordinates greatly. Speaking of which, I've heard that there is a brave Cavalry member who defeated a gigantic monster all by himself. Where is he?"

"Ah. I almost forgot to tell you, that's this man right here."

Baron Willhem, who had opened his mouth to defuse the situation, doubted his ears for a moment.

Everyone's eyes turned incredulously toward the black-haired man. The man said nothing. Instead, Kishiar once again broke the silence with a cheerful opening.

"Allow me to introduce him. My assistant, whom I adore and cherish, a promising talent in the Cavalry, who single-handedly defeated a gigantic monster, the bright future of the Cavalry - Yuder Aile."

'What?'

That black-haired man, who was he?

Baron Willhem felt a dizzying sensation from the consecutive shocks. He wanted to say something, but his parched mouth seemed to be clogged with sand, and no sound came out. Other nobles quickly asked questions on his behalf.

"Oh, Aile… So you have already been bestowed a last name from His Majesty the Emperor?"

"No. The last name was received not long after the Cavalry was formed. When I return this time, he'll probably get a bigger reward."

“Ah, that… I see. You must be very pleased to have such an outstanding subordinate.”

“Pleased or not, I have quite a few people I favor.”

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Chapter 325

Kishiar began to prattle all sorts of words, tinged with praise for his assistant Yuder Aile, as if he had been waiting for the opportunity. The Baron strained his ears, thinking that some valuable information might emerge, but it was all nonsense, so absurd that it made him suspect he was drunk.

‘If Yuder really defeated the monster by himself, tell me how he did it, what his abilities are. What business of mine is it what a commoner likes or dislikes!’

Even amidst the praise, to the point where it could become tiresome to the listener, Yuder Aile maintained a stoic expression. The Baron thought it was quite impressive that he could remain so calm in a situation where even nobles could not manage their expressions. Although he didn’t consider the power of an Awakener to be so extraordinary, there was a feeling that someone like him might actually be capable of slaying a gigantic monster by himself. It seemed that Emperor Keilusa’s interest in the Cavalry was not solely due to his younger sibling becoming an Awakener.

Other nobles appeared to feel the same, their glances at Yuder Aile subtly changing.

“Uh… Sir Aile, may I ask what your abilities are? I’m curious how you were able to kill that huge monster.”

“Yes, I, too, was curious as soon as I heard the rumor. Is that black mark on your face a wound from that time?”

As they, who had previously displayed disdain for commoners, softly cajoled and asked questions with smiling faces, Yuder Aile’s expression shifted slightly. But before he could open his mouth, Duke Peletta interjected and poured cold water on the conversation.

“Oh my. No one knows the answer better than I do, so why not ask me first? Do you not know that I’m the only one who can talk to my assistant?”

The statement seemed ludicrous, but there was nothing to be said since a person of the Duke’s standing had spoken. Kishiar continued to obstruct any covert conversations or questions directed at Yuder, blatantly blocking them every time. The Baron couldn’t even sigh at his unbelievably petty behavior, completely ignoring any semblance of dignity.

‘Anyway, seeing that this Yuder has received a last name not long after joining the Cavalry shows that he is indeed talented. The only problem is that he’s in the hands of such a petty person.’

To anyone who looked, the relationship between Duke Peletta and his assistant was evident. It was a mismatched pairing to the point of laughter: a Duke who was not only dissipated but also interested in men, treating his hapless subordinate like a toy, and a commoner enduring that humiliation because he had no power to refuse.

What if he had a little ability? How could he dare to rebel against Duke Peletta? Receiving a last name and success as a commoner was certainly significant, but to Kishiar, it seemed like a mere mirage that would vanish if he simply muttered to the Emperor. Yuder himself probably knew this well, hence he likely played deaf to the Duke’s advances and simply wished the Duke’s interest in him would wane soon. If he had any understanding of his position and ambition for a better future, anyone would do the same.

‘So obvious.’

Baron Willhem did not think his conjecture was wrong at all. Instead of focusing on Kishiar’s nonsense, he secretly observed the atmosphere of the Cavalry and the Peletta Knights.

They all seemed to have very subtle and pained serious expressions, staring at their plates, entirely absorbed in their meals. Some sent sympathetic glances toward Yuder Aile and even shook their shoulders in agony. They, too, must have found it anything but amusing that someone who had risen to the position of assistant had to endure such foolish talk throughout the meal.

“Commander.”

It was around the time that Kishiar’s unceasing nonsensical chatter about his assistant’s black hair and pale skin, which reminded them of a classical beauty, started to emerge. Finally, Yuder Aile put down his fork and knife and quietly opened his mouth.

“I believe that introduction is more than sufficient. Won’t you continue your meal? It loses its taste when it’s cold.”

His attitude, blunt and not even hiding his dislike of the situation, caused all the nobles who had been bearing their discomfort in silence to be taken aback. However, Kishiar, the one being talked about, didn’t show the slightest anger. With a lustful look in his eyes and a sultry smile, he declared that he would stop talking even though he hadn’t said half of what he intended. It was clear to anyone that he was thoroughly engrossed in a unique game with the commoner man.

It was indeed unsightly to see the banquet disturbed by a single word from a commoner, but it provided Baron Willhem with an opportunity to speak to Kishiar.

“Your… Your Grace, Duke.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt something important, but I heard a rumor related to Your Grace a while ago… May I ask about it now?”

“Go ahead. Speak.”

“Is it true that you have become the new owner of the glorious Divine Sword Orr? There were rumors that you used its power in the Great Sarain Forest, and I’ve been curious since before meeting you.”

Of all the rumors that had stirred up the entire West, the most significant was, of course, the defeat of the giant monster by Yuder Aile, but the enormous divine power detected within the Great Sarain Forest was not a small matter either. Emperor Keilusa had let slip that this divine power was undoubtedly related to Kishiar’s becoming the new owner of the divine sword, but Duke Tain had dismissed this as nonsense to Baron Willhem.

Baron Willhem carefully gauged Kishiar’s reaction. If it were untrue, he expected some sign of irritation, but what returned was a calm smile.

“Oh, how embarrassing. Word of what I did in the Great Sarain Forest has already spread this far.”

“Yes? So it’s really…?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“That… then… You really are… the new owner of the Divine Sword… and you even brought it to Tainu…?”

“That’s right.”

Although Kishiar affirmed it twice, his attitude was so flippant that it seemed utterly unbelievable. Baron Willhem reflexively shifted his gaze towards Kishiar’s waist, where the sword would be, but naturally, it was empty, as no one had brought a weapon to the banquet.

“Hmm. Don’t believe me? Well, I thought someone might have doubts, especially considering your lineage and position… But no, this is not something to discuss while enjoying a fine meal.”

Kishiar deflected the question with a laugh, but Baron Willhem understood the underlying meaning. No matter how foolish and dissipated Duke Peletta might be, he was the Emperor’s brother and hostile to the Dukedom. It was not unexpected that the attitude of Baron Willhem, the Lord of Tainu, and a descendant of the Tain family, might be perceived as slightly offensive.

Baron Willhem bowed his head, worrying that he might have overstepped and aroused the Duke’s suspicion.

“No, I didn’t dare doubt…”

“Your Highness, our Willhem family has been devout followers of the Sun God for generations. My husband has long regarded the existence of the Divine Sword as sacred. It appears his eagerness to see it has led to his impatience. Please, do not be angry.”

The Baroness, who was watching Baron Willhem’s behavior, quickly came to his defense.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is. Isn’t The Divine Sword the legendary sword we all grew up hearing about in our childhood? Only the chosen one can touch it. The thought of seeing its owner was overwhelmingly thrilling.”

Baron Willhem swiftly replied, grateful for his wife’s support.

“I understand that feeling. Even in my youth, I grew up listening to the legends of the first Emperor, with the Divine Sword, and the Archmage Luma.”

“Indeed, it is so.”

“Very well. If the opportunity arises, I shall show it to you.”

Baron Willhem breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow, it seemed he had managed to get through without revealing his excessive doubt.

‘It still seems like a lie… Whether the Duke of Peletta really possesses the Divine Sword will become clear later on. For today, this should suffice.’

As far as he could tell, the Duke of Peletta and his Cavalry seemed to have not noticed anything about the secret trade matter. If they had, they would surely have asked probing questions. Kishiar did not utter a word of common mourning for the Knights who had died in the Great Sarain Forest throughout the meal. All he did was continually giggle at the surrounding nobles’ forced praises, and flirt with the assistant seated beside him.

‘The exterior may be rather beautiful, but inside is a nauseatingly lecherous, stupid, and temperamental man.’

Baron Willhem made his judgment of Kishiar La Orr, and resolved to include in his new report to the Duke of Tain, ‘Duke Peletta is more dissolute than rumored, and his relationship with his Cavalry does not seem as good as perceived from the outside.’

The abilities of the Cavalry below were good, and they had been fortunate in defeating monsters in the Great Sarain Forest. But if anyone thought that such luck would continue, they were mistaken. He devised an ambitious plan to ease surveillance on the Cavalry and Duke Peletta, and focus more on the secret trade.

“The feast tonight was quite enjoyable. This is my first time in the west, but it seems it will create good memories.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“About this Lyung wine, could you bring the rest to my room? I’d like to drink more tonight.”

“O-of course.”

Though it was terribly unpleasant, Baron Willhem obediently ordered the more than half-remaining bottle of wine to be taken to Kishiar’s room. Kishiar smiled contentedly and lightly pressed his lips to Yuder Aile’s temple, who was seated beside him, causing the surrounding air to instantly become chilly.

“Now, shall we go?”

“…”

What was thought to be a pleasant end to the feast turned into a dreadful conclusion. Baron Willhem, in shock, supported his staggering wife and glared resentfully at the retreating figure of Kishiar, who merrily led away the wooden-faced man.

‘That nauseating man couldn’t possibly be the true owner of the Divine Sword!’

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Chapter 326

“Commander, you never said you would go to such lengths to play the role of sowing misunderstanding,” the voice stated.

“What are you talking about? I thought it was obvious that I had considered this much and accepted it.”

Yuder leaned against a chair, gazing at the back of the man undressing with a nonchalant face. There was a faint throbbing inside his head, but the other man merely seemed pleased.

They had just returned from spending dinner time at Baron Willhem’s main residence. Kishiar had led Yuder to his room as if it was the most natural thing to do, and Yuder had no choice but to watch the backs of his disappearing comrades, his shoulders shivering behind him.

Whether they were nearly dying to hold back laughter or not, the stares reflecting from Baron Willhem’s servants as Yuder entered Kishiar’s room were utterly impossible to ignore. Until the door was completely closed, the servants watched Kishiar’s retreating figure with eyes no different from the nobles at the banquet. That contemptuous yet somehow trivializing view was so disgusting that, if his abilities had been intact, Yuder would have wanted to wrap it in the wind and throw it out the window.

Pretending to be the dissolute Duke of Peletta to break down Baron Willhem and other people’s wariness, Kishiar’s plan was a perfect success—excluding Yuder’s complicated feelings.

Yuder watched Kishiar humming and wandering around, recalling the last day of the harvest festival party. The event that should have been joyful shattered into pieces with the assassination of the second son of the Apeto family, Lenore Shand Apeto. He had felt a

similar sensation then, staring at the back of the man standing alone in splendid formal attire.

This time, it was supposed to be different, as everyone already knew about the ‘dissolute Duke of Peletta,’ but it wasn’t. Watching Kishiar skillfully control the atmosphere of the banquet and direct everyone’s emotions toward him was, in some ways, even more difficult than before.

‘Would it have been better if I had not heard that remark?’

He found no answer in those red eyes that declared every accusation his own. He must have been lost in thought, as he only realized that dinner time was nearly over when someone came looking for him.

The fact that his calm had been so greatly shaken by a single word was hard to believe even for himself, but the reality was clear. Kishiar had truly made all the accusations target him. And as promised, he would take responsibility to ensure that Yuder suffered no harm.

Responsibility. That unfamiliar word dried and vanished in his mouth.

“Why such a serious face? Was that last kiss too intense?” Kishiar asked, placing the wine and glasses that Baron Willhem had ordered before Yuder.

“No.”

“Then why?”

“Commander, are you really alright?”

“What do you mean?”

Kishiar tilted his head as if he truly didn't understand. Yuder swallowed back the words he was about to say, 'being despised by others and hearing their accusations.' He didn't want to mention anything related to those irritating people. In the end, all he spat out were words no different from before.

"You didn't have to go this far…"

There was no need to play the role of the dissolute duke so thoroughly. It would have been enough to display a haughty demeanor just a bit, act a touch fussy, and show a nuance of flirting with men. Even then, Baron Willhem would have considered Kishiar as good as the rumors. Was there any reason to stir the pot more? Especially the moment he saw the noble's face scoffing at Kishiar and snorting at the mention of Yuder being called a beauty, he simply couldn't hold back his words.

"Perhaps the problem was that I did the job too well."

Kishiar, who had come to his own judgment, sat beside Yuder and skillfully poured a drink. He filled another glass halfway and handed it to Yuder.

"In my excitement, I may have lost control a bit. If you ask if it's okay, the problem was that it was too much fun."

"… How can that be fun?"

"Do I look like I'm lying? It was really fun. It's been a long time since I had such a good time."

Kishiar let out a lingering smile.

"You should have seen their faces when I kissed you. I can't wait to see how much Baron Willhem writes about me in the letters he sends to the other dukes. If he writes less than ten lines, I'll be disappointed in him."

“…Did you work so hard in anticipation of that?”

“Actually, there was a bit of personal motive involved.”

At the word ‘personal motive,’ Yuder frowned, and Kishiar raised his hand to lightly press and smooth his forehead. Unlike the perfume, Kishiar’s unique body scent that swirled coolly like peppermint slid down from his forehead, touching the tip of his nose as it passed.

“I don’t often have the chance to do as I please with you in public. I simply took advantage of the opportunity and gave it my all.”

Was that really all? Were there really no other feelings of humiliation, anger, or hurt?

Yuder was confident he would detect any hint of concealment from Kishiar. But those eyes, more transparent than the glass in his hand, were as straight and calm as ever when they revealed the truth to Yuder. He truly harbored no resentment for the scorn and insults he had to bear unnecessarily and sincerely enjoyed the situation… The realization of this made Yuder feel weak.

‘How can you act like that?’

Yuder silently repeated the unanswerable question.

Though he had seen many in his previous life, he had never seen one as strong as Kishiar. He was indeed a special being. And because he was so strong, Yuder Aile felt all the more pained.

The realization of how agonizing it was for such a strong person to be so troubled by Yuder’s insignificant wound was particularly painful because he had keenly felt and watched it all this time.

Some facts sometimes strike more heavily after time has passed than they did at the moment. It felt that way now.

“Anyway, we have to sleep here tonight, so tell me in advance if sharing the bed will be uncomfortable.”

“…Wasn’t it just to spend time and return, as before?”

“We have to sleep here while we’re here. Don’t you remember what I said?”

“When did you say that?”

Kishiar said he had explained on the way back to the annex. It seemed that the anger piled up by the nobles and servants was quite intense, as he didn’t remember it well. Yuder kept silent for a moment, then agreed, and touched his lips to the glass. The golden liquor burned his throat as though trying to ignite anger, but of course, he did not feel the least bit drunk.

“I thought you would refuse, but you accepted quickly.”

“Isn’t it something we’ve already agreed to do?”

“Yes, but I won’t force you.”

“You praise me so warmly in front of others, even flattering me, and yet you say such things.”

“Personal feelings are one thing; this is something else.”

“Anyway, I’m… okay with it. If it bothers you, Commander, I’ll sleep on the floor or in a chair. Just speak freely.”

“Surely I wouldn’t make you sleep in such a place.”

Kishiar laughed as though he had heard a very amusing joke. He picked up a bit of the salt and sugar that were piled on a small dish carved in the shape of a flower from crystal, spread it on the rim of his glass, and lightly clinked it against Yuder’s glass.

“Now, let’s commemorate the success of today’s operation.”

The liquid trembled with a clear sound. Yuder took a sip of the liquor and suddenly focused on Kishiar’s wet lips. A white powder, whether sugar or salt, was smudged on his red lips, tracing a fine line. It was a truly poisonous sight to the eye.

“If you keep staring at me like that, it’s a bit embarrassing.”

“…It was the powder that caught my attention.”

“The powder?”

Kishiar, who seemed to question back, discreetly licked his lower lip and shook his head.

“I don’t really know. It’d be nice if a lover wiped it away.”

“Isn’t it a time when we don’t have to play that role?”

“Then I’ll change it to ‘It would be nice if an assistant did it.’”

Even though it was clear he knew, there was no argument. It was still a bit painful to look at him every time, yet there was also an intense attraction.

“If my efforts today have pleased you, then reward me with this. That’s enough for me.”

There was no way to refuse his proposal, looking at how vivid and beautiful the man was with regained sight.

Yuder slowly raised his hand and brushed Kishiar’s lips. The tiny powders tickled his fingertips momentarily, but that was fleeting. No sooner had his hand touched the middle of his lips than the man, who seemed to have waited for it, sucked it in as if swallowing. The moment he mischievously bared his teeth and bit down hard on the

fingertips soaked in liquor, Yuder inadvertently held his breath and shuddered.

“Aah…”

A shock like lightning struck him from the bitten part, radiating throughout his body. Heat rose from the pit of his stomach, and the emotions he had barely suppressed exploded all at once.

Yuder abruptly pulled his hand away and pressed his lips to the spot instead. Even though he knew that it was not long ago that he had reached out and kissed Kishiar first, it strangely felt like a very distant memory. Though his impulse had been somewhat rough, Kishiar, without any sign of surprise, embraced Yuder’s neck. He welcomed the charging lips and tongue, which he had desired, as if a satisfied beast had devoured them.

Yuder tasted the bitterness of the liquor, the sweetness of the sugar, and the saltiness of the salt all at once. As their tongues entwined, one of the three would unexpectedly pop up to strike his head and then vanish, repeating the pattern in a frenzy.

By the time he came to his senses, he was lying atop Kishiar on the sofa. The fact that he continued even without realizing he had been swept up in the momentum was astonishing.

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Chapter 327

“I’m sorry. I, just…”

What on earth had he done? He had only sucked and lightly bitten his fingertip, but his mind flashed wickedly, and this was the result. There were indeed times in the past when he had acted impulsively around Kishiar, but back then, there was at least some minimal hesitation. This time, however, there was no warning whatsoever. It was as helpless as a spark catching dry firewood and instantly spreading into a massive fire. Doing something like this, and not even during the heat period, was a first for him as far as he could remember.

As Yuder tried to rise, stammering, unable to speak properly, Kishiar tightened the arm around his waist, stopping him.

“The temptation was mine, and you only reacted to it. There’s no need to be so flustered.”

Though they had separated, the lips that were still too close showed remnants of white powder, faintly twinkling in the soft light.

“I never knew you’d react so intensely… but I feel like I’ve received a proper reward, so it’s good.”

“Good, you say?”

“The fact that you’ve revealed your desire so honestly means that the possibility of you accepting me is higher, so of course, it’s good.”

Kishiar answered Yuder’s slow retort with a pleasurable smile, casually shifting one leg. Only then did Yuder realize what had changed below him where he was in contact with Kishiar, and he became even more flustered than before.

‘…Oh my God.’

Yuder had always thought of himself as quite dull when it came to lust. Even after Kishiar died in his previous life, he never felt discomfort from not having been with anyone, mainly because Kishiar had usually taken the lead in their relationship.

Perhaps it was because he was an Omega without a scent, but it didn’t matter. He never needed to think deeply about that part, especially since his first heat period in this life coincided with the manifestation of his second gender, and he had passed out for the entire duration.

But this was different. Kishiar hadn’t touched him with the intent of making love, but merely played a light prank. Yet Yuder’s front was unmistakably prominent and swollen.

The hot sensation he’d felt inside his stomach earlier must have been this, and the realization was utterly embarrassing.

‘I never felt like this when we kissed before.’

Until now, the longing and attraction he’d felt toward Kishiar seemed to reach beyond the physical and touch something inside him, a thrilling satisfaction that made him lose track of time and become entranced.

This sensation, however, was both similar to and different from the stinging in his body and the heat in his lower half that seemed to weigh down his head.

“Could it be that something’s wrong with me because of my injury?”

“What?”

Kishiar’s eyes widened, as though he’d heard something ridiculous, and then he burst into laughter.

“That can’t be. Kissing is natural, and do you think this is strange?”

“It’s not normal to react like this just from a light bite on the finger.”

“It is normal. Your body just reacted a little sensitively, that’s all.”

“But you’re perfectly fine, aren’t you?”

Kishiar seemed unable to contain his enjoyment of the situation. But Yuder’s mood had darkened even further. The fact that his partner remained undisturbed, while he was still engorged, made him feel even more ashamed when compared to his previous life.

Certainly, it hadn’t been like this in his previous life. It was always Kishiar who would unexpectedly knock people over, running like a person who had lost his sanity. He still had memories of being flabbergasted by Kishiar’s sudden strange touches in the middle of a perfectly normal conversation, but now the situation was reversed.

“Damn it, if that’s the problem, there is something I haven’t confessed so far. I think I need to tell you now.”

“What is it?”

“Promise me you won’t look at me like a beast after you know.”

“I will think about it after I hear it.”

Then Kishiar’s eyes seemed to narrow, but he quickly suppressed a smile.

“I usually exert a considerable amount of strength to stabilize my bowl, and if I apply that, I can do something quite useful. Do you

understand what I mean?”

“…”

“It means I can control the situation down there to some extent.”

This was truly… unexpected. Kishiar, who had noticed Yuder’s subtly changed expression, whispered that it was true.

“Especially lately, I’ve been putting a lot of effort into that.”

“So, you mean you’re still doing that now?”

“Of course.”

Kishiar, who had answered, slightly lifted his head and gently brushed Yuder’s eye with his lips. At the same time as he felt a little more strength in the big hand that had been wrapping around his back and waist, Yuder felt something expanding at a tremendous speed beneath their intertwined bodies.

“Do you believe me now?”

He had no choice but to believe it, even though he didn’t want to. Something much harder than Yuder’s slightly swollen front was poking between his legs. It was a sensation he must have felt many times in his previous life, but due to his faint memory of that time, it felt astonishingly large. Startled by the heat rising from the contact, Yuder lifted his body.

‘What is this…?’

In his surprise, complex thoughts vanished in an instant. Unlike Yuder’s, which was only half-swollen, Kishiar’s was boldly asserting its intent, as if it had never been dormant. Unable to continue his words before the vividly revealed physical desire, Kishiar faintly lifted the corner of his lips as if he had expected this. Whether it was true

that he had let go of the restraint, sweat had formed faintly between his brows.

“You thought I was beast-like, didn’t you?”

“No, it’s not that…”

Yuder closed his mouth, unable to articulate exactly what he was feeling, and the slight swelling he had felt completely subsided due to his surprise.

“Why in the world… were you holding this back?”

“Because I thought you wouldn’t want it.”

“I don’t remember ever saying that.”

“People convey more meaning through their eyes and bodies than words. Even though it may seem complicated, it’s surprisingly simple. Desire doesn’t always overlap with longing, just like how you’ve been suppressing yourself by hiding the back part…”

Even though his lower region seemed about to burst at any moment, Kishiar spoke quite calmly. However, his flushed cheeks could not be hidden.

“So, I wanted to walk at the same pace as you.”

“So, you mean you would have held this back for a lifetime if needed?”

“While I’m not as extreme as the priests who claim that physical desire is merely a trial and a greed to be discarded, I don’t attach much significance to it. Naturally… conversing with you, even if it’s just a single word, is more enjoyable than this.”

At the same time as his words ended, a hot breath tingled at his ear. He seemed to have said something like this a few times before,

but it was the first time it had struck his heart so profoundly. He felt both awestruck and desolate, and then, once again, memories from a past life welled up, making his throat feel scorched and dry.

‘…So am I.’

Yuder couldn’t let go of the hand holding the man in front of him. Even if he didn’t have the right to do so as a prisoner condemned to death, he did so anyway. If he had to endure a pain that would forever pierce his heart, rather than longing for Kishiar by his side, he thought it wouldn’t matter.

For the first time in his life, an intense longing mixed with desire surged up from beneath his mind, boiling with desperation. It made him feel as though he would drown in its intensity, and Yuder closed his eyes for a moment.

“Commander… You really are too much.”

Kishiar chuckled softly at the single sentence that flowed out with great difficulty, laden with many emotions.

“I think so too.”

Each time he laughed, his overlapping body also received stimulation simultaneously.

“Every day, I’m scheming, wanting to monopolize such an attractive partner all to myself, even if it burns my mind to ashes. I truly am a wicked person.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.”

Thus, saying such things in itself meant that he was too much.

His dark, sunken eyes were hot. His slightly parted lips were hot. The flames that began to burn inside him were hot.

And the arms that completely bared everything and embraced Yuder were too hot to bear. Unable to withstand the heat, Yuder opened his eyes again and saw his own face reflected in his reddened eyes.

A man, as flushed as Kishiar, revealed his intense desire for his opponent, gritting his teeth and panting. Kishiar's words that had distinguished between longing and desire were only then clearly understood.

Yuder barely suppressed the desire to kiss him and lifted his body a little. The arms around his waist were bothersome.

"First… please let me go."

"Why?"

"Don't you have to calm down?"

"You can calm down right now, so can't you get up a little later? It's a rare opportunity, so I wanted to enjoy it a little more."

"…Please stop doing things that seem bad for your body."

No matter how he thought about it, enduring it didn't seem healthy. Yuder cautiously twisted his body a little, placing his hand between his legs where it kept poking through the space revealed.

For a moment, the fingers that had been fondly tracing behind Yuder's ears flinched and stopped. Yuder slowly felt a very secret satisfaction, looking into the red eyes that began to lose composure. Only now did the shame he felt when he thought he was the only one inflamed fade away.

‘You may not know me, but I know you.’

Yuder knew exactly what kind of look that beautiful and composed man had when he was burning with desire.

“There are ways to calm down other than that, aren’t there?”

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Chapter 328

The moment he tried to put strength into his hand, Kishiar grabbed Yuder's arm. Facing Yuder, he slowly shook his head.

"Provocation is not what you do at this moment. Don't make the decision so easily."

"I don't make such decisions lightly."

"You haven't even fully recovered yet."

"That doesn't mean there's a particularly painful part either."

"You think I wouldn't know that you had difficulty gauging distances because of your eye?"

It had been such a subtle difference that others would hardly have noticed, but Kishiar had obviously seen everything. Yuder hesitated momentarily, but still did not withdraw the hand he had extended. He opened his mouth, gazing intently with one eye at his sweat-dampened white forehead.

"I know you've been concerned about my unhealed eye, Commander. But honestly, it's fine if the other eye never heals. So please, don't worry too much about it."

Kishiar frowned at those words. Observing his red eyes, where a painful emotion briefly flitted across, Yuder considered the emotions he must have hidden and swallowed every time he looked at his one eye.

"…How can you say that?"

"Wouldn't it be nice if you could think of it?"

‘How could I,’ Yuder thought, bending his body towards him. The two pairs of eyes facing each other mirrored one another.

“I can think of anything that is good. I saw everything I wanted to see before losing my sight, so I think I stored it all in one eye. I have no regrets.”

“…”

“Isn’t that enough?”

He had thought this way ever since both his eyes had stopped seeing. The last thing Yuder saw before losing his sight was the giant corpse of Pethuamet and Kishiar’s face, symbols of having escaped the tragedy of his previous life.

He was glad the last thing he saw was his face. He could vividly recall it even in darkness, so there was little regret. Especially now that he could see everything again, he had no complaints. That was still the case.

Yuder did not miss the slight tremble in Kishiar’s eyes as they slowly closed. When he opened them again after a long wait, his red irises were filled with emotion other than the previous pain.

“…Ah.”

With a faint sigh and eyes wavering as if melting, Yuder was stared at. Astonished for a moment at the hungry and entranced expression, Yuder was embraced so tightly he couldn’t breathe.

“I really can’t win against you.”

“…”

“That’s cheating. I really…”

He couldn’t hear the next words. They were stolen by a kiss. The sofa, unable to bear the weight of the two men, made a small sound as Yuder felt the soft cushion press against his back during their intense embrace.

Heat poured from the sensation of a thigh pressed against his, and unconsciously he tilted his head, letting hot breath escape between parted lips. Kishiar seemed determined not to let that go either, sucking it all in.

Yuder felt a dazzling pleasure inside his head as he fumblingly moved his hand to Kishiar’s pants. The moment he forcefully yanked at the button trapping the front, the heat felt a degree stronger.

‘It was the first time I ever climbed on top, or took off my clothes.’

Seeing Kishiar’s face, melted by desire, so clearly was, in truth, a first for Yuder as well. In a feeling both familiar and foreign, Yuder’s gaze was stolen by the sweat nestled between Kishiar’s furrowed brows. Just by looking at his flushed eyelids and his long, lowered golden eyelashes, a stomach without hunger became empty, and thirst spontaneously arose.

A little more. Yuder couldn’t bear it, wanting to see just a bit more.

The greed that arose at being able to desire something tangible like this was unbelievably intense. What was thought to have settled flared up instantaneously, bringing heat to the body, a warmth that spread inside.

When Yuder opened the lips a little wider, giving a burning cry, a kiss, deeper and more intertwined than expected, quenched that thirst. Yuder felt hands reach in between their rapid breaths. The touch, softly exploring and lowering Yuder’s pinned clothing, soon unbuttoned and freed them, just as Yuder had done earlier.

Feeling the sensation of something that had never before been touched exposed to the air, Yuder twisted uncontrollably, gasping for breath. That caused their lips to part, but Kishiar, like flowing water, traveled down the cheek to under the ear, pressing his lips once more to the soft flesh.

Breath paused again at the spark-like small stimulation. The sound of mucous membranes and flesh sticking to each other wasn't loud, but the shock felt immensely enormous, causing the entire body to tremble faintly.

Finally, when they fully exposed and held each other, a low moan mixed with heat and shock leaked out from both simultaneously.

Ah.

The sight of the wet, swollen red lips releasing breath in front of Yuder was too provocative, making resistance impossible. Yuder stared blankly at Kishiar, who was exuding a much deeper body scent than usual, his untamed wildness still held in check. The rich scent of an Alpha Awakener was spreading thickly, yet there was no fear at all. The heavy scent, trying to envelop Yuder's body, was as comforting as a long-lost, dear friend.

The day had come when Yuder could so calmly watch the clear desire in the eyes of the man gazing down through disheveled bangs.

If he had faced this situation just after returning back in time, or when the second gender manifestation had begun, he would have considered it a dreadful nightmare. But now, not a bit of such emotion was felt. The fact that Kishiar had fallen head over heels for Yuder, unable to see anything else, breaking down his usually ironclad reason, unbelievably felt good. Even Yuder's own disheveled body did not feel so bad.

The pain existed only within Yuder's unseen interior.

Yuder took a deep breath, slowly feeling the two hot entities held in his hand. Kishiar’s fingers and Yuder’s intertwined as they held hands, releasing another suppressed sigh simultaneously, but once the movement started, it couldn’t stop.

The sensations and memories that had been forgotten for so long sprung to mind, restless like the water of a lake when a stone is thrown. Yuder fumbled blindly, following instinct and memory, moving his hand slowly over something too enormous to grasp entirely. The pleasure in Yuder’s head seemed ready to explode just from the sight of his partner’s face, tensing and grimacing, releasing suppressed breath each time Yuder’s touch connected.

The two forces of heat collided and slid against each other within his hands, repeating the process again and again. The quicker the movements, the more the hot breath erupted repeatedly, scalding his biting lips. At some point, a liquid began to flow, unpleasantly wetting between his fingers, but he had no concern for it staining his clothes or the sofa. The sticky, resonating, and searing noise might have struck his ears, but it only added to his excitement, failing to cool him down.

Every time Kishiar swept his large hand down, Yuder lost himself in shocking pleasure. Unable to bear it, he would gasp and open his mouth, only to have the man, who seemed to have been waiting, entwine his tongue once again. The deep and intimate kiss that reached even deeper than before made his whole body jolt once again.

Despite one of the two entangled bodies not being his own, the terrible unity shook his mind to the point of disbelief. The pleasure was so excessive it seemed almost unreal.

It’s not even heat period. Such a thought briefly brushed his mind.

Neither of them in this place was in their heat period. They were performing this act while maintaining a perfectly normal rationality.

Yet, why had he not known before that it could be so desperate, so hungry? He could not understand. The past, when he thought there could be no act more irrational and disgusting than being immersed in primal sensation, was no longer remembered.

As the trembling movement reached its limit, accelerating and more strength entering his hands, his head became light. Yuder, wanting to see Kishiar's face without missing a single detail, roughly brushed away the messy hair stuck to his forehead with the back of his other hand, staring straight into his eyes. The beautiful face distorted in pleasure looked momentarily similar to when it expressed painful emotions, yet it was definitely different in some way.

Trying to see the difference a little more closely, Kishiar's hand suddenly gripped Yuder's more firmly, sweeping from the bottom to the top without mercy. Yuder's mind went blank as his body stiffened at the touch, as if it was trying to wring and swallow everything.

A gasp, not fully formed into sound, escaped from Yuder, and he tilted his head back. Kishiar wrapped his body, rounding his back, and closed his eyes with a clenched jaw. A few strands of golden hair stuck to his eyelids, quivered a few times, and strength filled his wrist visible between the sleeve and bony back of his hand. Yuder could not take his eyes away from that obscenely explicit sight.

Finally, as the inside of their palms became wet with heat, the tension in both their bodies relaxed simultaneously. Yuder stared blankly, panting, as Kishiar slowly opened his eyes again. The fact that only Yuder himself was reflected in those red eyes felt like something impossible.

He had seen a sight never witnessed in his previous life. That fact finally hit him, and his heart pounded heavily inside his chest.

Amidst a pain and turmoil as if someone was squeezing his insides, he finally closed his eyes. An unprotected and exposed kiss, as soft as down yet as heavy as a brand, settled over his throat and nape.

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Chapter 329

Even after his panting breath had somewhat subsided, Kishiar did not remove his lips from Yuder's neck. Yuder, too, did not try to struggle out of his embrace. In the past, once his task was completed, he would only be left with cold darkness, but this moment was different in every way.

Crumpled on a sofa that was too small to comfortably hold them both, Yuder vividly recognized his own change when he did not feel at all suffocated being enveloped in a strong hold still warm and moist. If possible, he thought it might even be okay to stay like this a little longer.

But he was also well aware of how enormous and excessive such a desire was.

"… I know we should get up and clean up, but I don't want to move."

Then, a whisper, as though reading Yuder's thoughts, reached his ears. As he slightly turned his head, Kishiar, with his eyes narrowed like a sated beast, half buried his face in Yuder's shoulder and let out a smile. His disheveled hair dampened by sweat couldn't conceal his beauty. The man, who was openly exuding a tremoring scent and satisfactory joy, felt like the summer sun that held all life on earth in his sway.

"Sorry, but would it be alright if we stayed like this for just a little while longer?"

Yuder nodded lightly in response. With a smile, Kishiar pressed his lips lightly once again to the lower part of Yuder's neck.

“I know it might sound funny to say this, but it feels like I’ve finally come to realize that you’re alive, right here in front of me.”

“… I apologize for causing so much trouble because of my eyes.”

“It’s not just because of your eyes… well, that too, but…”

As Kishiar tried to deny something then stopped, a curious glance was sent his way. A moment later, the reply came.

“More accurately, it’s because of the illusion.”

There was only one thing that could be associated with the word illusion. Yuder’s once languid senses contracted sharply and he forced his eyes open.

“… You mean my illusion?”

Kishiar didn’t answer. His silence was affirmation.

Yuder remembered the time when Kishiar had rushed out alone to confront Nahan. Then, Kishiar had said he saw Yuder in the illusion, but he had not gone into detail. There had been no mention of it since, so he thought it was quickly forgotten, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“I had no idea… that you were still concerned about that.”

“I didn’t plan on dwelling on it either. But it seems it’s not as easy to put out of mind as one would hope.”

“Did I attack you in the illusion?”

“What? No.”

Kishiar gave a small shake of his shoulders as he laughed.

“If that was the case, I wouldn’t have been worrying about it for so long. It would have been just ridiculous.”

A pain shot through Yuder’s chest. The tone of his voice seemed to suggest it was something that could never happen, and Yuder was left without a response.

Even though it hadn’t happened yet, at least in Yuder’s memories, the event existed clearly. He had no intention of repeating such an act in this life, but since the memory did not disappear from within him, Yuder kept his silence.

“I heard that his illusion is based on the thoughts in the mind of the recipient, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

Recalling the report he’d given previously and the subsequent encounters with Nahan, Yuder responded briefly.

“So that’s the strange part. What I saw was a scene I had neither imagined nor ever seen before.”

“What on earth did you see to make you so?”

“I saw you in my clothes. To be precise… you wore the Commander uniform.”

A huge shock hit him at once. If Kishiar had said he saw Yuder dying or severely injured, he might not have been so surprised. But Yuder, clad in the Commander uniform?

Wasn’t that the figure of Yudrain Aile, the Cavalry Commander from his previous life?

Kishiar, seeing Yuder’s greatly shaken eyes, quickly added an explanation.

“Just to be clear, I have never once thought that my assistant is vying for the position of Cavalry Commander. If you wanted to, you would have accepted the Deputy Commander position when I offered it to you before.”

Kishiar laughed, saying it was only natural considering how long it took to convince him to accept the created assistant position, but Yuder could not laugh back. His mind was colder than ever.

He had to think calmly. He didn’t want to arouse Kishiar’s suspicion by appearing overly shocked. If he had merely seen a vision of himself dressed in the Commander’s uniform, he couldn’t definitively conclude that he was entirely his previous self.

“… So, did you only see me wearing the Commander’s uniform? Or did I do anything else?”

“Just that.”

Kishiar, having responded, added after a moment.

“Upon reflection, the most likely guess would be that, perhaps after going through a possibly fatal situation, my anxious mind reflected in such a way.”

“I… I don’t see the connection.”

“Hmm… I need to explain how much of a self-conceited coward I was… but I can’t delay cleaning up any longer. Let’s continue the talk as we get cleaned.”

Looking at Yuder’s seriously furrowed brow, Kishiar squinted gently. Like a beast stretching, he reached out for the small water pitcher on the table and began to clean them. He poured water over a handkerchief he had taken out of his pocket, dampening it. His movements, as he cleaned the two of them, were incredibly smooth as if performing a completely natural task. Yuder had to awkwardly

accept his touch, having missed the opportunity to say that he would do it himself.

“I told you before. I quite like breaking down walls.”

As he finished cleaning his own hands, the man lifted Yuder’s wrist, diligently wiping between each finger while mumbling.

“But that’s only when there’s a wall to break. If there’s nothing there, I can’t do anything at all. And I was full of arrogance, thinking that wall would never disappear. Because that wall was so strong, it wouldn’t allow anyone’s approach.”

As he continued to clean Yuder’s fingers, Kishiar kept talking, his gaze fixed on his task.

“But this time, I’ve realized something. Even when I was full of arrogance, that wall could suddenly disappear. And if it did, I would be standing forever in its place, unable to do anything, falling into despair.”

“…”

“The essence of composure comes from certainty. When certainty shakes, no amount of composure can stand. So I would have wanted to hold onto you. I would have wanted to rebuild the certainty that, no matter what happened, you would not disappear from my side.”

As he finished wiping Yuder’s last finger, the man who mumbled indifferently as if he was analyzing someone else didn’t let go of the hand he held. His red gaze traced over Yuder’s rough fingertips.

“In other words… I was suddenly afraid. Being afraid means feeling fear, and it’s not strange that my fantasy capitalized on that fear and manifested in a distorted form. In fact, I was quite taken with it there.”

Yuder, whose words were abruptly and strangely interrupted, looked up to see the man holding his own hand with elegance and smiling self-mockingly.

“…Taken with it, you say?”

“Yes.”

“You mean it wasn’t fear?”

“It was shocking and strange, but not frightening. Just, well… I couldn’t take my eyes off it. Even knowing it was a fantasy, I thought it would be good if I could hold onto it, even if it meant giving up my seat to you.”

Kishiar pulled Yuder’s hand towards him and kissed him.

“Tell me anytime if you want to try.”

“I don’t.”

“Even if I say I’ll grant you whatever you want?”

“What I want is for you never to say such things again.”

“Indeed, you’re relentless. You did look good in white.”

Looked good? Yuder had worn that uniform for a long time but had never once thought that.

“Don’t even suggest I try it on as a joke. I really don’t like it.”

At the end of his serious remark, Kishiar replied, “I understand,” laughing. His movement of softly rubbing his nose against the back of Yuder’s hand and deeply inhaling conveyed a tingling sensation.

“Your scent has gotten stronger. Can you feel it?”

“…I can only feel your scent.”

“They say you usually can’t smell your own scent. But it’s very strong now.”

Yuder was caught in a strange mood. It was almost the first time someone had told him about his own scent.

‘…Right. This time, I’m an omega with a scent.’

Yuder realized anew that he too could emit a scent, just as much as it emanated from Kishiar.

‘It’s different from before.’

So let’s not think too deeply. The fantasy that Kishiar saw was not Yudrain. He hadn’t said so himself.

Yuder wanted to feel relieved, but a part of his mind couldn’t shake off the chill.

‘Really?’

Was it just that?

Was the fantasy of Yuder Aile in the white uniform merely a twisted manifestation of fear derived from Kishiar’s desire to hold onto him?

It was unknown. Yuder wiped his sweaty forehead and slowly got up. Only then did he see the surrounding devastation that had been out of sight while lying down. The expensive liquor-filled glass was rolling on the carpet, horribly soaking it, and the soft, cloth-covered sofa was a complete mess after their intense activities on it.

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As Yuder watched him silently, Kishiar, with a slightly mischievous smile, said, “You don’t need to clean it up.”

“Those outside will clean it up happily.”

Then they would probably scold Kishiar for leaving his precious drink so nonchalantly, and blink their eyes while looking for some other flaw to pick on. Yuder swallowed the words he couldn’t say.

Thinking about it, what they were imagining had become reality in some ways. Unlike before, when they had merely acted out roles to kill time, they really had done things on the sofa that shouldn’t be seen by others and shared a passionate heat together.

But Kishiar would dismiss those shared moments lightly, taking all the responsibility into his own hands again. He talked about his fantasies and said he was a cocky coward, but what kind of coward could do such a thing?

In retrospect, the real coward might have been himself. The fact that he was pathetically stifling his own throat with the pain of concealing a secret, unable to move on forgetting his past life completely or reveal the secret, was pitiful beyond words.

‘But I have no intention of leaving here.’

It was truly contradictory. His heart turned cold enough to lose his composure just at the thought that the figure he saw in Kishiar’s fantasy might be Yudrain because he knew himself so well.

As the empty holes within him were filled, and the forgotten memories and emotions resurfaced, the contradiction also deepened. It was painful to think that this would become more

profound, but if he were asked if he wanted to go back to when he couldn’t recall anything, the answer was no.

Yuder wished earnestly that Kishiar would never understand his contradiction. However, as long as he was so deeply attracted to Kishiar, the chance of being caught in that contradiction would inevitably increase.

He hadn’t thought keeping a secret would be so heavy before. But now it felt like a huge shackle made of cloth. It was a special cloth that didn’t feel any weight usually, but once it got wet, it absorbed the weight and became increasingly tough and heavy. This shackle, made of this particular cloth, was a handy tool used to immobilize prisoners in water dungeons. Yuder thought that the weight he felt when he was wearing those shackles before his execution was quite similar to what he was feeling now.

‘I endured until the end back then… but what about this time?’

A prisoner who had endured the water dungeon and the cloth shackles for over a month had his leg bones ripped out by the hands of soldiers who were showing off their strength. He ended up on the execution block, staying alive stubbornly even after being transferred through several prisons.

Back then, he had endured to prove his innocence, but now he thought that this pain might be the inevitable consequence given to him. That was the only difference.

When Kishiar asked him what he was thinking about, Yuder said it was nothing. Kishiar, thinking that Yuder was tired from what they had done, cared for him so he could wash up and go straight to bed.

In the extravagant bathroom where warm water would flow abundantly at the touch of a hand due to the engraved water magic, Yuder washed his body and thought about Kishiar, whom he had seen today for a long time. Even though he knew that Kishiar was

strong, not caring about others' gaze and instead using it, he still didn't want to see Kishiar flipping all the rumors on his own. Every time he thought about Kishiar, the uncontrollable desire that welled up, the heart-wrenching pain, and the reason he had decided to do everything he could to protect him, all said the same thing.

Then there was only one thing to do.

–-

"Yuder! How was last night? Was it okay?"

"Do you know how worried we were all night? Sharing a room with the Commander… Even if that room is ten times larger than the house I grew up in, it's not ordinary. I could never do it."

"Did you manage to sleep?"

The next day, Yuder glanced around as he listened to the members whispering their condolences that didn't sound like condolences, their faces strangely contorted in suppressed laughter. Baron Willhem's servants were silently cleaning around, but their ears were pointed in his direction. Having confirmed this, Yuder casually turned his head towards Ever, who had first spoken to him, and opened his mouth.

"Of course, I had a good night's sleep in the same bed as the Commander."

"Ah, that. Is that so?"

"Yes. It was pleasant."

Suddenly, everyone around them froze as if time had stopped. After a moment, Baron Willhem's servants began to whisper with strange expressions. It was a slightly different reaction than he had

expected, and Ever, who had leaned close to Yuder, whispered urgently in his ear.

“No, Yuder… Who would believe you if you said that? It’s too awkward, better to say nothing at all.”

“…”

“I’ve felt this since the banquet yesterday, Yuder, you’re not particularly talented at this kind of thing. Should I say that God is fair?”

Caught off guard by his comment, Yuder couldn’t respond when he was suddenly called from not too far away.

“Sir Yuder! Come over here.”

The Priest Lusan, who had recovered significantly during their journey to Tainu, was gesturing at him with a flushed face. Yuder, seeing Enon, who was sitting next to him nonchalantly munching on a lemon, moved away from the other members and headed toward them.

“My goodness. Watching you, I thought my heart was going to drop. Why on earth did you do that?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What he means is that even if I had opened the window and yelled that this was all a setup, it would have been better than what you just did.”

Enon’s words were more direct than Lusan’s. Yuder took a moment to reflect on his behavior. It was just an apt and straightforward statement in line with his goals, so he couldn’t quite guess what the problem was.

“Do I seem unsuited for my role?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand? Which lover of any noble in the world would behave like that? Even if I threw this lemon in front of the Commander’s room, it would look less suspicious than you.”

“That’s too harsh, Sir Enon. If you talk like that, even Sir Yuder would feel hurt.”

Honestly, Yuder thought Lusan was being more harsh, but he kept his mouth shut.

He had decided just last night to spread rumors about Kishiar. He had already experienced this in his previous life, so he thought he would easily achieve his goal in Kishiar’s absence, but it was a bit embarrassing for everyone to react this way.

‘What’s the problem?’

He couldn’t remember what he did and how he did it in his previous life. At that time, even if he did nothing, everyone would deepen their misunderstanding and added more malicious rumors, so he never felt the need to make things worse. Rather, the more he tried to quell it, the more people picked fights, and it was a headache.

‘Rumors were easy to spread when I didn’t want them, but now when I really want them, they don’t.’

“…But it’s true that we slept together last night.”

Other than briefly intertwining on the sofa, nothing happened, but it was a fact that they slept in the same bed.

“Ah, is that so?”

“We even drank.”

“Did you hear about how the Commander insulted Baron Willhem by recklessly pouring that expensive wine under the sofa?”

Lusan shared with a grin, recounting the rumor he had overheard from the whispering servants earlier.

“Baron Willhem is said to be extremely upset about it. I heard that’s why the Commander wanted to meet with him alone.”

It was true that Kishiar had gone to meet Willhem alone for a while, but he had not known this was the reason. Strictly speaking, the one who made him spill the wine without drinking properly was more Yuder’s fault. However, even when he said this, Lusan did not believe him.

“Hmm. Yuder. It seems like you’re trying to cover for him. I suggest you avoid saying that in front of others. Wouldn’t it be better to stay quiet and just say that the Commander did it?”

“…”

Instead of answering, Yuder looked at Enon. Enon quietly put the second lemon in his mouth. Whether the servants of the Willhem family were shocked by the strong man easily eating a lemon, peel and all, he didn’t care at all.

“Anyway, I think I’ll be able to give you the divine power again from tomorrow. Has your condition improved a bit?”

The stains that remained on his face and skin had almost disappeared. But his strength was still not fully recovered, and the spot on his left eye had only slightly faded. After examining his condition, Lusan gave him a few recovery pills that Enon had made.

After that, Lusan was called by the other members and had to get up from his seat. It was just Yuder and Enon left. Perhaps because of the unique atmosphere Enon had, there were many members who found him more difficult than Lusan. Hence, no one dared to approach the table they were sitting at.

“But… Why are you suddenly showing an interest in role-playing all of a sudden?”

Enon muttered in a voice no one else could hear.

“You, until yesterday, you were just glaring at the others with a face completely devoid of motivation. The Commander seemed to enjoy it, though.”

He must have been sitting at the very end of the long table with Lusan, but it seemed that he had seen all the way up to there.

“…My mind changed.”

“What thought?”

“The thought that not just one person should take responsibility.”

Enon asked what he meant, but Yuder did not elaborate. Instead, he recalled something Enon had asked him in annoyance once.

“Enon. You remember what my goal is, don’t you?”

“You said we need to protect. Why? Is it related to this situation? Do you think it will cause some problems to the Commander?”

“No.”

Enon, who had omitted the subject Kishiar, replied gruffly. Yuder recalled another statement that Enon had made afterward, his eyes lowering silently.

In the future, either the Commander really becomes important, or if he and the Commander were in a love relationship to death. Or both. Which one is it?…

In his previous life, it was neither. Kishiar might have been a person who was potentially important for the future, but he was not important to Yuder, and they had never exchanged deep emotions beyond physical intimacy…at least according to his current judgment.

But what about now?

Yuder turned his head towards the window instead of voicing his answer. The sound of clamorous voices echoed from the front gate. Kishiar must have returned from the meeting.

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“Commander.”

Not long after, the members saluted in unison at the sight of Kishiar who had just entered the reception room. Nathan Zuckerman followed him, his effort to conform to the role of the idle Knight of the Peletta apparent in his deliberately disheveled outfit. For the first time, Yuder felt deep sympathy for Nathan and rose from his seat. Enon opened his mouth, rolling his third lemon.

“Are you going to stick with the Commander all day again?”

“I guess so.”

“If you have time, come to me.”

“Why?”

“You, have you already forgotten why I was called here?”

Enon asked fiercely. The reason why he, who didn’t want to leave the capital, was sitting there was purely because of Yuder’s injury.

“I have to return to the capital as soon as possible. In the meantime, I’ve been looking around and thinking about something, so come anyway.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“Don’t keep saying you’re sorry, think about taking care of yourself and getting better.”

It was hard to tell if it was a reprimand or worry, but given Enon’s personality, it was likely the latter. Yuder faintly smiled, then nodded

his head slightly.

“According to Baron Willhem today, Tainu has many sights and attractions. You would want to see all the beauty that you might never see again, right?”

“Yes!”

Meanwhile, Kishiar, who had started talking to the members, was in the middle of his speech, in the perfect demeanor of a prodigal Duke.

“Good. I will give a week’s rest to both the second dispatch team that has come this far and the first dispatch team that has suffered a lot in the Great Sarain Forest. Don’t worry about the cost, just don’t cross the border of Tainu and rest as much as you like.”

At Kishiar’s words, everyone cheered. In fact, they all knew that their real task was not to go out and play, but to search for traces of the illegal trade of the Tain family, but there’s no one who wouldn’t be happy at being told they could freely spend money and have fun. Baron Willhem’s servants glared at the departing Cavalry members, who were leaving in groups with insect-bitten faces, but no one paid any attention to their gaze.

Yuder approached Kishiar, watching the happy members disappearing. Nathan Zuckerman, forcing himself to look down at his loose black cravat, greeted him first.

“You’re here.”

“Yes.”

He looked at Yuder’s face with an expression as if he had a lot to say, but didn’t know what to say, and then sighed. In fact, ever since they reunited outside the Great Sarain Forest after Yuder regained his sight, he had been maintaining such an attitude. It was

understandable considering the complex feelings he must have had knowing what his lord had been doing because of Yuder. As Yuder pretended not to notice and turned his head, Kishiar invited him out with a cheerful face as if he had been waiting.

“Yuder. I think we should go out today too, what do you think?”

“Where to?”

“Anywhere would be enjoyable as long as I’m with my assistant.”

“…Understood.”

Yuder accepted without asking further.

“Nathan, you’re coming too. Follow us within ten steps so that my assistant won’t be uncomfortable.”

“Yes…”

Nathan answered with a clouded face, looking as cold as ice.

“Do you have someone you want to go with, assistant?”

“I am…”

When he lightly glanced around, all those who had not yet left and were still remaining avoided Yuder’s gaze. Enon, who had his umpteenth lemon in front of him, also furrowed his brow and lowered his head as soon as his eyes met Yuder’s. His dislike couldn’t have been more apparent.

“There is none.”

“Well, this will be a rare, modest outing.”

Despite Kishiar’s announcement that he would be heading out with only two accompanying personnel, there was no significant

objection from the Willhem Household. The Baron, preoccupied with matters, regretfully sent a message via a servant stating his inability to join them. The indifference in his demeanor, which seemed unlikely given he was dealing with a Duke, clearly conveyed his assessment of Kishiar.

“Commander. Is it true that Baron Willhem desired to meet you because of the alcohol spilled yesterday?”

“Who said that?”

When Yuder shared the story he heard from Lusan, Kishiar burst into laughter.

“That wasn’t why he wanted to see me. Outwardly, he was grandiose, claiming he could offer more assistance, but he must have felt regret internally.”

“Then…”

“He called me to inquire about the Divine Sword. I acted ignorant and slipped away, which should keep him churning inside for a while.”

The sword Kishiar possessed was, of course, the real Divine Sword. However, he deliberately played dumb, feigning a misunderstanding of Baron Willhem’s words. The Baron, guessing that Kishiar was stalling because the sword wasn’t truly divine, was furious. Yet, he could not openly rebuke him.

The Divine Sword in question was currently wrapped thickly in cloth around its sheath and hilt and hung from Kishiar’s waist. It had been concealed this way since leaving Great Sarain Forest, with the passage of time naturally staining the cloth, making it look ordinary, even a mere practice sword, to the untrained eye.

“What can I do? Even if I tell him, he doesn’t believe it’s the real Divine Sword. Regardless of what I say, it would seem like a lie to him.”

They spent the day touring various parts of Tainu, riding in a carriage provided by Baron Willhem. Kishiar purchased an enormous amount of items from all sorts of stores under the guise of gifting them to people around him. Among them, of course, were items intended for Yuder, who was playing the role of the Duke’s lover.

Expensive new sword sheaths and dazzling gloves that couldn’t be used in everyday life, cloaks made lavishly with gems and embroidery, and boxes containing precious leather shoes, quickly piled up next to Yuder’s seat like a mountain. Ordinarily, he wouldn’t have accepted such gifts, but rejecting them now could potentially undermine their mission.

After buying several items to gift to Nathan Zuckerman and forcing them upon him, Kishiar, with a cheerful face, visited a new store. It was a jeweler’s shop, distinguished by a sign featuring a red deer’s head.

“Hmm. A snuffbox made of Erihill jade, indeed. Truly reflective of the western land trade hub. It’s rare, even in the capital, to see such a variety of precious foreign items in circulation. What do you think, assistant? Does it appeal to you?”

“…I don’t smoke, so I won’t be able to use it.”

When Yuder politely declined, Kishiar, widening his eyes, picked it up. The snuffbox, carved out of blue jade, was just the right size to fit in a man’s palm. Kishiar playfully retorted while easily opening the gem-cut lock and revealing the empty interior.

“One doesn’t necessarily only put tobacco in a snuffbox. People often carry more things in here than you might think.”

“That’s correct. One can indeed fit quite a number of things in there.”

The jeweler, thrilled by his rare big-spending client, immediately nodded and added proudly to the explanation upon hearing Kishiar’s statement.

“You can also carry various incense other than tobacco, and some people carry their daily medicine. It has an additional lock inside, ideal for items you don’t want to be discovered.”

“Is that so? I didn’t know that.”

“When you twist it like this, a small space inside is revealed.”

The merchant, proudly explaining that only the craftsmen of Aeril could create such a thing, twisted a certain part of the cloth lining inside the snuffbox. As he did, the bottom opened, revealing another small and flat empty space.

“An interesting item indeed. I like it. I’ll buy this one as well.”

“Thank you. You won’t regret it.”

“This kind of item must have been difficult to import. How did you manage?”

“Difficult doesn’t mean impossible. All goods entering Tainu go through the verification of the Red Deer Consortium, funded by the Tain House. We are one of the places that have a long-standing contract with the Red Deer Consortium.”

At the mention of the Tain House from the confident merchant, Kishiar’s eyes momentarily twinkled secretively.

“Oh… I see. So, the item has passed the verification of the Tain House. I don’t have to worry about counterfeits.”

“Of course.”

“Can I see more of these kind of items?”

With a vague smile, the merchant responded that it would be difficult to select such items right now.

“However, if you come back in a few days, I will have more items that you might find interesting. If you let me know where you are staying, I’ll contact you.”

“It’s no fun if I can’t see them right away. Well, I’ll stop by again if I remember.”

“I’m truly sorry to disappoint you.”

“That’s alright.”

Kishiar turned around, as if he was a debauched noble whose interest had dwindled.

“I might as well visit the Red Deer Consortium directly. How do I get there?”

“It would be difficult for you to visit there without an introduction. It’s not a place where they sell goods directly…”

“What a shame. There’s no item I want to see right now, and you can’t even tell me where the source is… Do I look like someone who needs an introduction?”

As the smile faded from the man’s face who had been laughing until a moment ago, an intense chill was felt, so powerful that it was hard to believe he was the same person. The merchant, under the peculiar pressure that silently bore down on him, held his breath and blinked rapidly.

“No, that’s… uh… that… I…”

“I?”

“I, I was about to… uh… I was about to offer… to write you a letter of introduction.”

Only then did Kishiar smile again. The merchant, startled by the sensation that disappeared as quickly as a mirage, hurriedly disappeared into the back of the shop.

“…Are you planning on going there right away?”

“Of course.”

Kishiar lightly answered Yuder’s question.

“That’s because I want to give a very special gift to my lover right now.”

“…”

Unknowingly, Yuder once again shifted his gaze slightly. The gaze of Nathan Zuckerman was intensely hot.

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In this place, engaging in banter would not yield any meaningful exchange. Thus, he decided to remain silent.

Soon after, Kishiar learned the address of the district where the Red Deer Consortium was located from a merchant who appeared with an introduction letter. Yuder sighed softly as he peered inside the carriage, noting even more boxes than before. If Kishiar had bought any more items here, they would have needed to call for an additional carriage.

“Why? Aren’t you pleased with the gifts?”

“It’s fortunate that we’ve made progress in our investigation into the trade of the Tain Ducal House, but I feel you’ve spent too much for it.”

“This isn’t that much of an expense.”

Kishiar replied nonchalantly, resting his arm atop one of the stacked boxes.

“The cost is worth several times this. Don’t worry.”

Although his smile was alluringly confident, Nathan’s gaze on Yuder’s cheek became even more intense than before. Yuder surmised that Nathan Zuckerman must have sensed something from them, something that couldn’t be explained simply by their roles in this charade.

Thinking about it, Kishiar being the first to act in front of others today was what they had hoped for. However, the fact that the first person to act was Kishiar’s loyal adjutant, a knight from the Southern country, was slightly problematic.

It seemed that on this matter alone, things wouldn’t go as Yuder had intended.

“This is the Red Deer Consortium.”

Kishiar parked the carriage where he could oversee the entire building. For a guild that claimed to inspect all traded goods entering Tainu, its size was rather modest. However, the number of people bustling about was surprisingly large. Workers emerged from the building to unload the arriving carriages, then transfer the goods to other vehicles. It was a continuous scene of busy activity.

“There sure are a lot of people, considering they said it’s difficult to enter without an introduction.”

“The name may be a guild, but their actual task is to manage traded goods on behalf of the Tain Ducal House.”

“Do you think they’re also connected to Baron Willhem?”

“Probably.”

Yuder attentively watched the carriages as they continually loaded and unloaded goods. Given the volume of merchandise being moved, there must have been a separate storage warehouse somewhere.

“Shall we go in?”

Without hesitation, Kishiar took the lead, introduction letter in hand. When the tall, handsome man flanked by two other men approached with the letter, the bustling workers of the guild halted, unsure of how to react. They tried explaining that they didn’t sell goods here, but Kishiar, true to his carefree duke demeanor, dismissed their words with a simple tilt of his head.

“I want to see the special items being brought in right now. I wish to find a nice gift for my lover today.”

Soon after, a man holding a bundle of papers and a quill pen rushed out from inside the building, approaching Kishiar.

“Who… Who are you, sir?”

“Don’t you recognize me?”

Although it was obvious they wouldn’t know him, Kishiar asked with a hint of mischief. Imperial family members were often born with blonde hair and red eyes, but these features were not exclusive to them. Many noble families with a long lineage had members with golden hair or red-colored eyes appearances, a result of mixed imperial bloodlines. The Tain Ducal House, rulers of Tainu, was especially famous for many members born with such features.

Assuming by his appearance that he was simply a noble from a prestigious family, the ordinary man was taken aback when Kishiar revealed his identity as the Duke of Peletta.

“Duke Peletta, also known as the Commander of the Cavalry, Kishiar La Orr.”

“Yes?”

“I am currently staying at Baron Willhem’s mansion.”

“Yes?”

“Haven’t you heard of the achievements of the Cavalry from the Great Sarain Forest? This is truly disappointing.”

“No, I haven’t.”

The man, with a shocked expression, lowered his head, clearly unsure whether to kneel or not. After a moment of confusion, he

regained his composure. Carefully, he led Kishiar, Yuder, and Nathan inside. The main building consisted of two floors. Without pausing, Yuder wandered the open space on the first floor, observing the workers carrying luggage, then headed to the second floor. The second floor had proper rooms, but most were filled with stacks of documents.

The man led them to the cleanest reception room and asked them to wait momentarily while he fetched the person in charge. As soon as he left, Kishiar immediately called over Nathan Zuckerman.

“Nathan.”

“Yes?”

“From now on, you’re going to pretend you went to find the restroom and got lost.”

“…”

“After you’ve assessed the interior structure and personnel, reconvene with us.”

The instincts of an exceptional swordmaster sometimes surpassed even that of a mage or an Awakener. With Nathan Zuckerman’s skills, he would quickly discern such details.

“Understood.”

Nathan Zuckerman promptly stood up without any sign of discomfort at the command. Not long after he left the room, a middle-aged man with glasses hurriedly entered. He bore a striking resemblance to Baron Willhem.

“It’s an honor to meet Duke Peletta, the hero who saved the entire west and the guardian of noble blood. I am Graham Willhem, the adviser of the Red Deer Consortium.”

“Willhem?”

“The Baron Willhem you’ve already met is my elder brother.”

“Oh, I see.”

Graham seemed better at hiding his true feelings than his brother. He appeared unfazed even by the sudden visit of Duke Peletta, who had brought only two attendants to the main building.

“My apologies, Your Grace, but I heard you came here to arrange a gift for someone dear to you. Is that correct?”

“Precisely.”

“However, our firm only evaluates and authenticates items brought in to Tainu from outside. We do not have the right to sell. I’m truly sorry.”

“Who decided that? Isn’t it inconvenient to have to distribute imported items to other stores for sale?”

“That was the directive of Duke Tain, the owner of Tainu. Tainu has been one of the central trading hubs of the western land route for a long time. Without such procedures, there would be problems with indiscriminate imports, verifications, and sales. Duke Tain, after repeatedly experiencing such issues, established this system about 15 years ago to prevent further inconvenience.”

Yuder discovered another virtue in the younger Willhem compared to his brother: he was very eloquent.

“I see. If your family has been doing this for 15 years, when did you start working here?”

“Me? I… took over this position after my uncle, so I’ve been here for about 7 years.”

“That’s impressive. It must not have been an easy task.”

“Not at all.”

As the unexpected praise began, a brief expression of suspicion flickered across Graham Willhem’s face, as if he were trying to decipher Kishiar’s intentions.

“Did you hear about me from your brother?”

“Yes. I heard that you would soon be visiting Tainu. I thought I wouldn’t see you since I don’t stay in the mansion, but… It’s truly an honor to meet you here…”

“Oh? So, you really consider it an honor?”

“Yes?… Yes, of course.”

“Then shouldn’t you help me even more?”

Kishiar chuckled and poked Graham Willhem’s side.

“But I just told you I don’t have the authority to sell…”

“How frustrating.”

Kishiar shook his head.

“I get that I can’t buy right now. But time isn’t infinite. Do you think I’ll have another chance to visit here with my lovely assistant? At the very least, can’t you show me what you have? Other merchants visiting here can at least look at the goods, can’t they?”

“…”

“I’ve wasted enough time getting here, so I don’t intend to leave just like that. I’d rather stay here than let my assistant leave empty-handed.”

With an absurdly childish threat, Kishiar pulled Yuder close, embracing his shoulder. Yuder leaned in, trying to be as cooperative as possible. Graham Willhem's eyes twitched uncontrollably, trembling minutely.

"I'm sorry, but… your precious one, the one you wanted to gift…?"

"Why don't you find out?"

Kishiar teasingly kissed the top of Yuder's forehead, laughing. Graham Willhem abruptly stood up. His gaze, fixed on the two of them, was filled not with restrained emotion but with disgust. Despite his eloquence, it seemed he wasn't so different from his brother in essence.

"What are you looking for? Let me know, and I'll guide you to the warehouse directly. The warehouse, unlike the store, is a dirty place where only the lowly work, but if you still want to see…"

"I'm looking for rare and interesting imports that require meticulous verification. I'd appreciate it if you could hurry. Otherwise, while waiting, I might get so bored that I'd want to do something here with my assistant."

"Some of those valuables just arrived today and are in the basement. I'll guide you. Please follow."

Graham Willhem hastily exited the room. Kishiar, with a soft laugh, led Yuder. As they left, it was fortunate that Nathan Zuckerman's absence hadn't been noticed.

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The underground passage, where they had brought in the valuables, was located in the exact opposite direction from where they had entered. As Yuder descended along stairs that resembled an emergency exit, he realized that he couldn't see the workers from the first floor from this angle.

'They've strategically placed it to avoid any human gaze. I bet they're also controlling access.'

As expected, a few men were loitering near the dark entrance of the basement, guarding the way. They had been idly stretched out, but at the sudden appearance of Graham and the strangers, they swiftly adjusted their postures. Yuder discreetly observed them. Most who worked in such places were mercenaries hired on a temporary basis. However, judging from the weapons they held and their saluting stance, they didn't seem like your average mercenaries.

"You've arrived."

"Is anyone inside right now?"

"No one."

Graham, glancing disdainfully at the men, turned his head. His gaze passed over Kishiar and landed on Yuder's face with evident distaste.

"You can enter right away…but do you plan to keep…him with you throughout?"

"What if I do?"

“The inside isn’t dangerous, so it might be better if the others wait here. It will be more comfortable for you to look around.”

It was a gentle way of saying he didn’t want to let in not just the duke, but even his male lover. Kishiar, however, wasn’t about to take that at face value. Crossing his arms, he expertly shielded Yuder from Graham’s view and playfully asked, “Hmm. What do you think is best, Yuder? Should I go alone?”

“I’m fine either way.”

“No, no. In a situation like this, you should be jealous and tell me not to leave you alone. Aren’t you worried about me being alone with another man?”

The expressions of both Graham and the guards changed dramatically. Yuder hesitated for a moment before saying, “…Of course, I’m worried.”

For a moment, Kishiar looked genuinely surprised, as if he hadn’t expected Yuder to say that. Graham, unable to object to Yuder anymore, hastily gestured for the door to be opened.

“Open the door, now!”

He was trying to let the duke enter without the lover, but it nearly dragged him into a scandal. As he quickly stepped inside, an eerie chill followed him.

Without any hindrance, Yuder entered the interior alongside Kishiar. At first glance, the basement seemed dim and old. However, upon closer inspection, it was evident that it was thoroughly prepared to protect valuable items. The floor was designed to amplify even the softest sound, and the walls, when lightly grazed by Yuder’s fingers, were incomparably solid to the floors above. There were surely hidden security spells, making this space undeniably the true heart of the building.

“All the items brought in yesterday are in one place. We’ll go there directly.”

“There seem to be many rooms. Aren’t we going to check the others?”

When Kishiar, looking around at the closed doors lining the corridor, asked, Graham shook his head.

“The other rooms are just backup storage. Given the limited number of valuables to store here, most remain empty.”

Graham’s voice was calm, but after speaking, the subtle throat-clearing and his swallowing, coupled with his dry lips compressing, emitted a hint of suspicion.

‘There’s a high chance it was a lie.’

“This is the place.”

Graham stood in front of a door, pulling out a necklace he had tucked inside his clothes. When he brought one hand with the deer-antler pendant from the necklace to the door, a blue magic circle began to shine and spread from that point. Moments later, the door opened silently and effortlessly.

Illuminated by moonstones, the interior was filled with transparent shelves. Graham briefly introduced the items on the shelves after warning not to touch anything carelessly, as they were all protected by magic.

“Among the recent arrivals, many are from Aeril and Nelarn. As you might already know, Aeril has a deep history in gem crafting, and Nelarn once had many magic stone mines. Even if the magical tools made during those times are not usable now, they are valuable as collectibles due to their beautiful appearance.”

Various luxury items made from all sorts of gems and dozens of magic tools claimed to be from a long time ago were on display, each showcasing their unique beauty. They indeed were worth the immense effort to protect.

“Beautiful indeed. But just being beautiful isn’t intriguing. At the last store I visited, they showed me a jade snuffbox with a hidden compartment. Do you have something like that?”

“Recent crafts from Aeril often incorporate such hidden compartments. Many items here have those features. For instance, this brooch can hold two portraits. Normally, you’ll see just the first picture, but if you turn the tiny protrusion, it changes to the second.”

Those who needed such items probably had secret lovers or affairs they couldn’t reveal to others. Graham’s attempt to subtly criticize came across as him expressing his discomfort towards Kishiar, who blatantly brought his male lover.

“That’s interesting. If it were me, I’d put two pictures of the same person.”

With an unfazed smile, Kishiar examined the brooch. Graham realized that indirect criticisms simply didn’t work on the man before him.

“So, when do you plan to send these items to other stores?”

“Once all appraisal processes are completed, we will call the merchants we have contracts with. These items took a while to come in due to the trade route of Great Sarain Forest not functioning properly for some time. Distribution might be delayed, but we intend to send everything out within a week.”

“I see. Good to know. I’ve enjoyed the viewing. I’ve decided on a gift, so I should probably return in about a week.”

Kishiar seemed truly contented with just looking around and then stepped back. Seeing Kishiar's compliant demeanor, Graham slightly relaxed the tension between his brows.

As they exited the basement, the guards at the door looked at them with curious eyes. Yuder felt a bit pleased, realizing that this time, the gaze wasn't just focused on Kishiar but also on him.

"Your Majesty, are you planning to return to your mansion now?"

"That's the plan."

"When the items are released, I'll inform you through my brother."

His kindness was filled with a plea not to come back here again if possible.

They ascended to the second floor and retraced their steps. Nathan Zuckerman, who had returned in their absence, was seated quietly in the parlor. He rose when he saw Kishiar.

"…A Southerner?"

"Ah, he's my officer. He had some urgent matters to attend to earlier and I completely forgot to mention it."

Graham, who belatedly noticed Nathan Zuckerman's presence, looked taken aback. Kishiar casually explained with a smile.

"Nathan, did you manage to get your task done?"

"Yes, I got a bit lost along the way, which made my return delayed. Did you find the item you were looking for?"

"Well, nothing particularly caught my fancy, but there were quite a few decent things. It was good to come."

Graham couldn’t guess the profound implications hidden within this casual conversation. He tried to conceal his astonishment as he saw the three off. Yuder suspected what kind of message he would convey to his brother, Baron Willhem.

“There was a spell in the basement that distorts perception. It made the vast space appear much smaller than it actually is. I’m rather curious about what else might be behind those closed doors.”

As soon as Kishiar got into the carriage, he voiced suspicions similar to what Yuder had felt underground. Yuder cautiously added his assumption, mentioning that those guarding the basement didn’t seem like ordinary mercenaries.

“Their posture and the fact that all of them used identical weapons lead me to believe they might be regular guards trained in Tainu.”

“With Baron Willhem in charge, that’s highly probable.”

Kishiar nodded in agreement, a sardonic smile on his lips.

“Externally, they claim it’s all part of a well-intentioned policy, acting as if they are a fair and just group. But every sign shows their utter pettiness. It seems the Tain Duke has monopolized the verification process of trade goods in Tainu for a long time and made a good profit.”

Given that everyone knew the Duke of Tain was now even delving into more dangerous trades, the words of Graham Willhem, claiming that the Duke only had Tainu’s best interests in mind when making policies, seemed utterly laughable.

“Nathan, what did you see?”

“I examined the structure of the first and second floors. There weren’t any hidden spaces, but in the innermost room, which I

assume is the master’s, there was a safe.”

“Did you check what’s inside?”

“There was a spell on it that seemed hard to break in such a short time. I tried, but failed when someone working approached the room.”

“That’s a pity.”

Kishiar clicked his tongue briefly.

“Also… I observed the workers on the first floor, and there was something peculiar.”

“Peculiar in what way?”

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“Most of them were ordinary people, but among them was someone imbued with a peculiar energy.”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed.

“Explain in detail.”

“When the Cavalry members use their powers strongly, I occasionally feel a unique sensation. Today, while observing those working on the first floor, I felt a similar sensation and tried to chase after the person causing it… but I lost them.”

“You lost them?”

“I was certain I was following them, but they disappeared. Looking around, I couldn’t determine who I had been chasing.”

It was truly astonishing that anyone, let alone Nathan Zuckerman, could lose someone. Kishiar seemed to share the sentiment, reining in his smile and falling deep into thought.

“Do you remember their face?”

“I only saw their back, so I can’t be certain.”

“What about other distinctive features?”

At that, Nathan Zuckerman’s eyelids fluttered. Trying to recall, he remained silent for a moment, then shook his head with a look of both discomfort and bewilderment.

“I thought I knew, but as I try to describe it, I’m not sure. They might have been taller than me, or perhaps shorter… I don’t even

understand what I’m saying.”

“I have an inkling of who the culprit might be.”

Kishiar muttered, turning his head. Yuder caught his gaze and gave a slight nod.

“It seems Nahan has already made his move here.”

A heavy tension enveloped the interior of the carriage. As Yuder recalled the last sight of Nahan, Kishiar gently tapped the gift box he had been resting his arm on.

“Thinking about it, this might be a blessing in disguise. Proof that we are on the right track.”

“…”

“Both of you, inform all the members about this. I need to meet with Baron Willhem.”

While Kishiar went to find Baron Willhem, Yuder gathered the returned Cavalry members. As for the Peletta Knights, Nathan Zuckerman would handle them, so Yuder only needed to inform the cavalry. Members who already knew about Nahan’s activities in Great Sarain Forest and the Star of Nagran couldn’t hide their tension.

“Could they have infiltrated here as well? How can we identify someone who can use illusions?”

“It’s unfortunate that we have so few among us with mental abilities.”

Yuder knew why there were so few initial members with mental abilities. Those with abilities hard to visually prove often couldn’t

even properly submit their applications and were washed out. Kanna had almost met the same fate.

This issue might be alleviated when new members joined, but that time was not now.

“I don’t care. If the one who did that to Priest Lusan is already here, it’s a good thing. I’ve been curious since the days of the Apeto Duchy. This time, I’ll definitely see his face and make him pay.”

Ever, with her fist clenched coldly, replied. Lusan, who had been wearing a somber expression in the distance, couldn’t hide his touched expression.

“Ever…”

“Ah, and Yuder. We also went out today and heard a rather troubling rumor.”

As Yuder turned his head in confusion, Ever waited for a moment when the Willhem household’s servants were away and lowered her voice.

“Recently, in a village near Tainu, ten lunatics appeared all at once. There were foreigners and empire citizens alike, all of whom couldn’t remember who they were or why they were there.”

The mixed group of men and women wandered aimlessly until they were arrested by the security force that had received a report. Yet, surprisingly, such incidents didn’t end there.

“I heard that just yesterday, in a nearby village, several similar groups appeared, causing unease among the locals,” one said.

“It sounds like a rumor we need to verify,” another remarked.

“Right? It’s possible that these could be the people driven out from the Awakener’s village that Kanna visited.”

Ever, while suggesting it as a possibility, looked quite certain.

“If we investigate these people, we might find clues about where they went.”

“Did you find out where the captured ones went?”

“According to the villagers, if the village lord finds it too challenging to decide, they are transferred to Tainu for a verdict. So, they might already be here somewhere.”

It was a plausible assumption. Yuder nodded and said that he would report it to Kishiar. Although initiating the process might lead to friction with the knights or soldiers inside Tainu, Ever wasn’t one to get intimidated by such prospects, so there seemed to be no need to worry.

“Let me know if you find out more.”

“I will. Yuder, you must be exhausted from following the commander. If you ever need help, just let me know. Sometimes, it’s better to accept assistance from others rather than overstretching oneself, understand?”

“…”

Yuder felt a mix of emotions at the gentle consolation but simply responded with a nod of acknowledgment.

“Is Enon here?”

Taking advantage of the time before Kishiar returned, Yuder headed to the room where Enon was staying. As soon as Yuder

knocked, Enon peered out, scanned Yuder from top to bottom, and then opened the door a bit wider to let him in.

“You returned quicker than I expected.”

“There were urgent matters I had to relay to others.”

“What urgent matters?”

The room Enon occupied was a single room, much smaller than the one Kishiar and Yuder were staying in. Yet, compared to the dilapidated pharmacy of the slum where he had previously lived, it was almost palatial.

Briefly explaining the Red Deer Consortium and the Awakener’s village in the Great Sarain Forest where Kishiar and Yuder went, and potentially where Nahan was, Enon casually asked,

“I heard about that Awakener village or whatever from others yapping about it. But is this Nahan guy really that formidable?”

“Among the Awakeners with the mental ability I’ve encountered, it’s hard to find anyone stronger than him.”

“So, you can’t defeat him?”

That was a somewhat sensitive question. After a moment of silence, Yuder shook his head.

“I can defeat him.”

“Then it’s settled. From what I’ve heard, they all seem like Modar types. Better weed them out before they grow too strong.”

Yuder hesitated for a moment at the meaningful statement.

“Modar?”

“You’ve never heard of him? The mage Modar.”

Of course, Yuder had. But only in old tales and legends. Most stories about him painted Modar as a wicked mage who wreaked havoc upon the world but ultimately faced divine retribution and failed.

“I knew of him… but I never thought he was real.”

“Of course, he was. He ran amok everywhere, trying to create a kingdom only for mages using magic, and eventually got caught and was executed.”

“By whom?”

“By Luma.”

He hadn’t known that. Suddenly, Yuder felt both a strong familiarity with the figure from the legend and a sense of distance from Enon. Memories of his past life, when he had never fully believed the information Enon shared, suddenly flashed through his mind.

“…Enon, how old are you?”

“Why do you need to know?”

As Yuder impulsively asked the question, Enon, who was rummaging through a bag placed on the bed, responded curtly. After a moment, he continued, “Didn’t my past self tell you about that?”

“You did mention you’ve lived a long time.”

“Hmm… well… why is it that you, who was satisfied with that answer back then, suddenly want to know now?”

Yuder remained silent. How could he tell Enon that in his previous life, Enon had vanished after leaving a letter that hinted he

might never return? The fact that he had always been curious but couldn’t ask made it even harder. In truth, apart from the brief facts Enon had shared, Yuder knew very little about him. He had simply thought of Enon as the first ally to rely upon.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine.”

“Do you realize how annoying it is when you say things like that?”

Finally finding what he had been searching for in his bag, Enon approached Yuder, holding something. Yuder saw his own expressionless reflection in Enon’s bright yellow eyes.

“Every time you look at me with that distant gaze, as if you know something about me, it really irks me. If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, stop. Before telling you my age, did I, I don’t know, die or something?”

“…”

For a moment, Yuder couldn’t deny it. To be precise, Enon hadn’t died but had left and never returned. However, Yuder couldn’t honestly distinguish between the two.

“Is it true?”

Seeing the assurance in Yuder’s silence, the look in Enon’s eyes changed.

“Did I really die?”

“…You said you didn’t believe it.”

“I don’t. But…!”

Enon, about to shout something, abruptly closed his mouth. He ruffled his hair roughly and took a deep breath.

“…Since you appeared, the world has been changing, becoming different from before. You definitely know something. I’m sure of that.”

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Unbeknownst to himself, Yuder wore a bitter smile, only to erase it shortly after.

No one was better at distinguishing between lies and truths than Enon. Though he claimed not to believe, the fact that he eventually said the exact opposite indicated which way his thoughts had been leaning.

Yuder had been the one to seek Enon's help in the hope that things would turn out this way from the beginning. However, once it actually came to pass, he strangely didn't feel as good about it as he had expected. He somewhat regretted not being able to maintain his usual composure when talking about his past life in front of Enon.

"Yes, you're right. As I've mentioned before, I know a bit more than others."

What Yuder knew was only the future he had witnessed in his own life. When he first turned back time, he felt joy for a moment, having grasped all possibilities. However, the more he twisted the past to change the outcome, the more he became aware of how many things in the world he didn't know.

But there was still much he could do with that limited information.

"But Enon, watching me closely over time, your thoughts couldn't have been solely that, right?"

"…"

"You are not the kind of person who will just leave the capital just because someone drags you along. Even now…"

“Stop right there.”

“Alright. If you have thoughts of helping me a bit more, feel free to ask your questions. I’ll tell you as much as I can within what I know. You make the decision.”

Yuder ceased his speech, staring at Enon’s face, his mouth firmly closed.

“But if that happens… I’d like you to tell me more about yourself.”

“What’s the use of knowing me in detail? Can you believe whatever I tell you?”

“I’ll believe. Because you believed in me.”

At his flat response, Enon momentarily stopped speaking. He looked away as if at a loss for words, then mumbled in a defeated tone.

“I said… I still don’t believe.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I really don’t know what you’re thinking. I’ve never met a person like you since Luma.”

Whether being compared to the legendary Archmage was good or bad, he didn’t know. Enon raised his head towards the ceiling, then let out a deep sigh and returned to his original position.

“I need some time to think. I’m not sure at the moment.”

“Understood. You can tell me when you’ve sorted things out.”

“…But tell me, did I really die?”

Yuder quietly shook his head. Looking into Enon's seriously wide eyes, he somehow let out a bitter smile.

"No, not exactly. You disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"You said you had something to investigate and left a letter, then disappeared. You told me to mention the information you had given me if we met again and you didn't remember me."

He didn't realize it would be after he had died and returned.

"I never got to meet you again after that."

Hearing Yuder's words, Enon stroked his chin, a look of recognition in his eyes.

"…Then I guess I did die. Maybe different from the death you're thinking of."

Puzzled about what he meant, Yuder blinked, only to see Enon wince and give a grin.

"I'm not human."

"What?"

"See. You don't believe me, do you? Your words sound exactly like that to me."

"No…"

It was too sudden to fully comprehend, but Yuder decided to carefully ask again.

"I'll believe you. If you're not human… what are you then."

“I wonder.”

In imitation, Enon replied briefly, then tilted his head to ask another question.

“What do you think it is?”

“…”

The Enon before him looked nothing more than a handsome young man with a youthful body, no matter how he looked. He had heard tales of a time when fairies, monsters, and other non-human entities had lived in this world alongside humans, but these stories only ever surfaced in ancient texts.

“You mentioned… The Guardian of Luma.”

“Yeah, The Guardian of Luma. Honestly, even I find it difficult to precisely define myself. It’s hard to simply explain how I was created for a purpose and received life through a contract. If I have to introduce myself, I’d say I’m The Guardian of Luma, but…..”

Enon, who had been momentarily thoughtful, resumed speaking.

“To express it more accurately, I am an entity that has been linked by combining will and body through magic.”

A long silence passed. Enon stared at Yuder and asked him pointedly,

“So, what do you think? You’ve heard what you wanted to hear, do you have anything else to say? What are your thoughts? Do you think it’s nonsense not to believe? Or, are you scared? Do you think I’m a monster?”

“I was thinking about the Armor Knight of Luma in the palace.”

Enon’s expression changed as if he’d been caught off guard.

“What? That thing is still around?”

“I saw it last time.”

Thinking about the Armor Knight, reputedly created by Luma, which he had seen moving perfectly fine, it didn’t seem too strange to believe Enon’s words. There was a being who had come back by turning back time after death, so what was so significant about a human created by magic? Yuder inspected Enon from head to toe, hesitated a bit, and asked,

“So, was that also created by Luma? Is it similar to you?”

“No.”

Enon answered sharply, then shortly after, his mouth curled up into a slight grin. He looked at Yuder as if he didn’t know what to say, then murmured in a low voice,

“You’re crazy… Yuder… You really believe me.”

“There’s a way to go back in time, so I guess an Archmage can create you.”

Yuder found it odd that he was saying something that his past, incredibly practical self, Yuder Aile, would never have believed. Enon, hearing Yuder’s words, made a face as if he was about to laugh but then quickly turned his head away.

“Damn. You believe too easily. This is even weirder.”

“…”

“Did I really go wrong?”

Enon, who had been mumbling to himself, added that he still didn’t fully trust Yuder’s words. His voice was much weaker

compared to before. He kept silent for a while before saying that he wanted to ask one question before sorting out his thoughts.

“How did you come back?”

Yuder had expected this question would be the first one. However, anticipating a question did not mean he could answer it well.

The day when petals were fluttering in the sky and the sky was unusually clear came to Yuder’s mind. It was the day when everything ended for him and when everything began again.

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

“…You don’t know?”

“I just came back here all of a sudden. I thought of it as an opportunity and thought I should do better this time.”

Enon’s gaze on him became even stranger.

Yuder had expected to be called a madman once again, but for some reason, Enon remained silent. After a moment, the words he uttered brought up an unexpected conversation from the past.

“Do you remember… a statement I made before?”

“What statement?”

“I said that even Luma couldn’t turn back time.”

Yuder seemed to recall something like that being said around the time Enon had refused to believe his claim about coming from the future. As Yuder nodded, Enon’s expression darkened. In his eyes, an unknowable thought spiraled far away.

“Luma… he was obsessed with a magical research for a long time. He kept it a secret from others, but I knew it was research about time-reversing magic. But he failed. That’s why he left. He left everything behind…”

Yuder just quietly listened to Enon’s disjointed mumblings.

“I actually couldn’t understand why he wanted to research that kind of magic. I was curious why he didn’t give up despite the constant failures…”

Enon’s gaze slowly returned to Yuder. He was looking at Yuder with an utterly unfamiliar expression.

“He said back then. If a god can do it, a human can too.”

“…”

“I’m not saying I fully believe you yet. But I… Every time I see you, I keep thinking about that. Maybe the reason Luma was interested in that was because there was a precedent of someone spouting the same words, like you.”

“Are you saying there was someone else who turned back time?”

“I don’t know.”

Enon answered briefly and rubbed his head.

“But somehow, I have that feeling.”

Enon’s questions ended there. Even though they had had a conversation that was hard for both of them to believe, Yuder strangely felt that they shared something deeper than before.

“Take this.”

Enon took out an item from his bag and handed it to Yuder. It was a small potion with a transparent color.

“Your recovery seems slow probably because your body had somewhat adapted to the monster’s blood before the magic spell succeeded, so I made a potion to stimulate your vitality.”

“…What happens if I drink this?”

“It will likely influence your innate energy, so you might have trouble controlling your strength for a while. If it reacts well, you might have a fever, but there won’t be any significant harm.”

Enon answered along with a word that he was not completely certain.

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“But it’s not really dangerous.”

“…”

Yuder took a glance at the item, then immediately opened the lid and drank from it. The medicine wasn’t enough for more than a sip, so he didn’t feel any significant changes right away.

“Also, it may not have much effect, so that thing… the one that the Commander brought here. I’d like to examine it more.”

“The monster?”

“Yes. That one.”

Upon entering this place, Yuder remembered the cage that Kishiar had entrusted to Nathan Zuckerman. It was holding Pethuamet. Very few people knew that Pethuamet had arrived there alive, but Enon and Lusan were included because they were in charge of medical care. Lusan was shocked to hear that the small monster had responded to Yuder, but Enon didn’t say a word, seemingly having gathered some hint from the situation.

“But it might be dangerous.”

“Should I worry about a small creature like that being dangerous to me, or should I be more worried about what’s happening to your body? Why do I always have to be the one worrying about this? Shouldn’t it be you? Your eyes need to get better soon so I can return to the capital.”

In response to Enon’s sudden irritation, Yuder had no choice but to agree for now.

“Okay. I’ll let the Commander know.”

“Don’t think you’re fine just because you’re feeling better. There’s an excessive mix of energies within you. The pure poison that created the darkened skin could tip in any direction. Don’t use your strength carelessly.”

“I’ve always wondered… how do you know that? Can you see it?”

“Can I see it…? Wait. Don’t change the subject.”

Enon, who seemed about to answer, suddenly tensed his eyes, revealing his teeth. Yuder quietly stepped back and opened the door. He said he should go now, to which Enon responded with a mumble filled with expletives, but he didn’t stop Yuder.

“Hey.”

Yuder turned his head at the voice he heard just before he closed the door. Enon, tilting his head as if displeased, whispered softly.

“You said before that you didn’t want the same thing to happen as before you returned here.”

“…”

“Did that include my case too?”

Yuder remained silent. His silence was answer enough. The man with the ash-colored hair shook his brows slightly, let out a sigh, and blinked once.

“So that’s why you came to me.”

–-

When Baron Willhem heard the news that Kishiar, who had gone out, had come across the traces of the knight killer he had met in the

Great Sarain Forest, his reaction was fierce.

He immediately doubled the number of guards patrolling Tainu and even sent out knights who normally didn't patrol the streets to conduct inspections. The people of Tainu, unaware of the reason, trembled in confusion, but Baron Willhem placated them by simply saying it was to capture a dangerous criminal.

"His haste will help us. I'm planning to follow the areas where he has sent a concentrated number of knights."

Returning from successfully manipulating his target with a single sentence, Kishiar removed his coat with a satisfied smile. As he began to unbutton his shirt without hesitation, Yuder subtly averted his gaze. It was a sight he'd seen in the morning, but somehow, watching him undress at night felt a bit more provocative.

Yet, when he turned his head, what met his gaze was a new sofa that the servants had replaced in the meantime. When Yuder had returned before Kishiar and seen the mountain of gift boxes and the newly changed sofa, he was overcome with a strange feeling as he remembered what they had done on the ruined sofa. He mused that seeing the new sofa had troubled him more than when he had actually caused the mess, knowing that Kishiar would undoubtedly laugh if he admitted this.

"How are things with the members? Have you explained everything to them?"

"Yes."

Yuder reflexively answered, lifting his head once more. The sight of Kishiar's exposed torso caught his eye, making him pause momentarily.

"…Ever said she heard a strange rumor today, did you already receive a report about it?"

“No. What happened?”

Kishiar’s neck and shoulders glistened under the chandelier light. The straight bones leading to the inside of his shoulder, the shadow filling them like a well, and the perfect line formed by his chest flowing down like water drew his gaze with their beauty.

“Yuder?”

“Yes.”

Yuder came back to his senses at Kishiar’s call.

“I apologize. According to Ever…”

Suddenly, he couldn’t remember what Ever had said. He realized for the first time how hard it was to keep his cool, with his waist reflexively tensing up and an uncomfortable sensation creeping in simultaneously.

“I see. We’ll have to investigate that as well. However…”

After listening to Yuder’s full statement, Kishiar narrowed his eyes slightly and stepped closer.

“Did something happen while I was away?”

“…”

A worried voice accompanied his touch as it grazed his cheek. Through the chill of it, Yuder only then realized how heated his own skin was. Suddenly, the potion that Enon had given him came to his mind.

He had said that if the medicine worked, a fever might occur, apparently, his body temperature had risen without him realizing it. He felt slightly relieved, thinking that the sudden tension he had felt was because of that.

“Enon gave me a potion that he said would help… it seems to have caused a fever.”

“A potion?”

“He said that the reason my eyes aren’t getting better could be because they had already partially adapted to the monster’s blood before the magic casting.”

The hand stroking his cheek paused momentarily. After contemplating in silence, Kishiar muttered briefly, “That could be possible.”

“It’s a potion to move vitality, so it might cause a bit of a fever, but it won’t be harmful to my health. More importantly…”

Yuder sighed softly and turned his head.

“Please let me go now.”

His hand withdrew, but the tension didn’t disappear. Because Kishiar’s bare upper body was too close.

“Do you feel unwell?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“I’m really fine, so for now… I wish you would start by getting dressed.”

“…It seems like you’re really okay.”

Only then did Kishiar raise the corners of his mouth, seeming to believe Yuder’s assertion that he was not unwell.

“Where did you put the clothes I had washed? I thought they were here, but I don’t see them.”

“They’re over there. Please wait.”

Hoping that his face hadn’t revealed his discomfort, Yuder rose from his seat. The indoor shirt for Duke Peletta had been washed and folded neatly on the bed. As he returned with it, he was reminded of a similar situation from a day when Kishiar’s condition had been poor and he had been lying in the Commander’s bedroom.

At that time, too, he had avoided looking directly at Kishiar’s body, but now the situation was somehow more intense than before. At least then, seeing Kishiar’s body hadn’t caused a sudden rush of heat that left him parched…

When Yuder returned with the shirt and opened it for Kishiar to easily slip his arms into, Kishiar smirked.

“There was a day like this before… do you remember?”

Yuder had just been thinking of that very moment, and it seemed Kishiar was doing the same.

“Yes.”

“So this is what it feels like to have a similar yet different experience.”

Yuder didn’t respond. It felt as though he’d been caught in his thoughts. Once Kishiar had slipped his arms into the shirt, he began to button it up himself, smoothing out the fabric. His movements were expertly done.

“Did you already have your meal?”

“No.”

Yuder hadn’t eaten dinner because his conversation with Enon had gone on longer than expected. But he didn’t mind; he wasn’t particularly hungry.

“I didn’t feel like eating with Baron Willhem, so I just had some tea. In that case, we should have something brought here.”

“I’m fine.”

“There’s nothing more melancholy than eating alone. Let’s eat together.”

Even though Yuder knew that Kishiar ate most of his meals alone at the Cavalry, he found himself agreeing. Once Kishiar discovered that Yuder had skipped a meal due to his conversation with Enon, he uncharacteristically inquired further.

“It’s the first time I’ve heard you say that you lost track of time in a conversation. Was it that interesting?”

It wasn’t an interesting conversation. In fact, it was closer to the opposite. But Yuder couldn’t tell him what they had discussed, so he changed the subject.

“Just a discussion related to my condition. Enon asked for a personal examination of the monster.”

“The monster?”

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“There seemed to be parts of the treatment that he wanted to investigate further. I thought it might be dangerous, so he suggested that it would be okay to explore it with someone else accompanying him… For now, I’ve replied that I would inform the Commander.”

“I see…”

Over the tilted head of Kishiar, a fleeting emotion, unidentifiable, passed by momentarily.

“I’m relieved he has come. If I knew this would happen, I should’ve included him in the first dispatch team.”

“If you had, I believe Enon would have refused.”

“I heard he’s assertive, but was he to that extent?”

His assertiveness was not ordinary. Even if the Emperor came, he was the kind of person who would bravely say that he didn’t like what he didn’t like. What would status and authority mean to him, who was not human? There had been a reason why he had seemed to strangely transcend such things since his previous life. As he quietly answered affirmatively to these thoughts, Kishiar chuckled lightly.

“I haven’t had many personal conversations with him, so I don’t know much. What kind of person is he, from your perspective?”

At Kishiar’s question, Yuder found himself unable to answer immediately. Perhaps because he had learned some shocking facts about Enon today, the question felt difficult.

Just then, the servants Kishiar had summoned arrived, interrupting their conversation momentarily. Yuder looked down at the fist-sized bread piled before him. The crust was extremely tough, but the pale and soft crumb exposed after peeling the crust was a characteristic of Western-style bread. He suddenly thought that the hard yet soft aspects of this bread were like Enon.

“Enon is… I think he’s like this bread.”

“…Bread?”

Kishiar, who was about to pick up a piece of bread, asked as if he didn’t understand.

“Yes. He’s hard on the outside but not on the inside, they seem somewhat alike.”

Upon understanding why Yuder said so, Kishiar laughed for a long time.

“I see… That’s an interesting analogy. I’m jealous that you express a deep faith that I can feel.”

Yuder blinked at the unexpected words that followed the laughter.

“Jealous, of what?”

“The person who knows aspects of you that I don’t, and lends a hand when you’re struggling, earning your trust. It’s natural to be jealous.”

It was a statement that Enon would shudder and run away from if he heard, yet it seemed genuinely sincere rather than just a joke. Yuder felt slightly bewildered, as this was the first time Kishiar had said something like that in his two lifetimes.

“Even if you say there are aspects you don’t know… There’s nothing special. And it’s not just Enon I trust.”

“The aspects you say are nothing special are what I’m curious about.”

Kishiar smirked, taking a sip of the alcohol he poured into his cup.

“And don’t worry, I’m not being petulant. I am indeed curious about the parts I don’t know, but there’s something else I’m more curious about.”

“…What is it?”

“You’ve been overly cooperative since this morning, so I wondered if there’s been a change of heart.”

Once the bewildering topic passed, this time it felt as if an expected mountain had appeared. Yuder pressed his lips together, feeling the piercing red gaze trying to see through his gentle demeanor. He must’ve noticed the change in his behavior throughout the day, and Yuder had anticipated a comment on it.

“Did someone say something to you while I was not around this morning?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“Just… I decided to be like this.”

“I remember distinctly stating that I would take full responsibility.”

“I understand that. However, I believe this issue is unrelated to your willingness to bear responsibility.”

The words he had prepared in advance flowed out resolutely from his mouth.

“Once I take up a role, I don’t wish to hide behind the Commander, letting things pass without doing anything.”

“You know, it’s funny. Just when I thought you’d finally accept things quietly, you’re harboring such thoughts.”

Kishiar slowly shook his head.

“Those rumors mean nothing to me. You understand, don’t you? Adding one more issue to Duke Peletta’s reputation wouldn’t make it any worse. Even considering all that, why feel uncomfortable standing behind me while I handle everything I’ve calculated?”

“I understand that as well. But isn’t it also true that you’re trying to handle the rumors far more than you initially planned?”

The Cavalry members, who still didn’t quite understand the ways and motives of the nobility, simply found this role-play amusing, or didn’t ponder the consequences that would follow. But in Yuder’s eyes, Kishiar seemed to be orchestrating things so that he would bear everything alone. As he had promised to take responsibility for any issues that might arise from this matter, he was perfectly shielding Yuder from others’ views.

If he had only accepted that quietly, he wouldn’t have been led down the same path as his previous life. Neither would Yuder Aile’s name have been tarnished, nor would he have felt discomfort from the stares surrounding him.

However, that was it.

“Don’t think I’m unaware. So I’ll also act faithfully to my role as much as I can. That would maintain the balance we originally planned.”

“Even when there’s no need for that? Why choose the more difficult path?”

“Commander, you’re the one who convinced me that taking on this role wouldn’t only bring me trouble. As I remember, you persuaded me because you wanted my cooperation. So why are you trying to stop me?”

“…”

“If it’s a difficult path for me, it must be a difficult path for you too, Commander. I want to move in a direction that can help you, not a direction that’s comfortable for me.”

Kishiar fell silent. His face was speechless.

“…Indeed, I have nothing to say about that.”

“…”

“I expected to enjoy this unchanged state until this matter was resolved. Even the hilariously stubborn self-proclaimed conservative nobility of the West would be made fun of, and it was an opportunity to show my assistant, who sometimes worries about me too much, a reliable image. I won’t deny that.”

Kishiar set down the glass he was holding. There was an inevitable smile and sigh in his gaze as he looked at Yuder.

“But of course, you never move as I anticipate.”

For the first time, Yuder sensed that he had gained something akin to victory in his verbal duel with Kishiar. Yuder finally smiled.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“An unseen arrow flies farthest.”

Citing an old saying that an unexpected attack is the strongest, Kishiar let out a long breath. The man who wiped his mouth with a napkin opened his mouth with an indescribable expression.

“…How’s the fever you had earlier?”

“I’m fine now.”

Having conversed with Kishiar, Yuder’s sudden fever had subsided. As Yuder answered affably, the man gave a faint smile and nodded.

“If that’s the case, go wash up first. I’ll have to order more drinks after I clean up the leftover dishes.”

“Aren’t you drinking too much?”

“What can I do? Today, I took a big hit, so I’ll drink and get a good night’s sleep. And oh, tell Enon from the medical division that I’ve accepted his request.”

Kishiar added, however, that as Yuder had feared, there could be dangers involved in examining the monster. Thus, whenever Phetuamet was examined, he must have Nathan Zuckerman at his side.

“I understand. Enon will be grateful.”

“I should be the one thanking him, for striving so hard to heal you, like bread.”

The phrase ‘like bread’ caught Yuder’s attention.

“Please refrain from using that phrase in front of others.”

“What’s wrong with being like bread? Isn’t it good? I like those kinds of people. The type that, like an uncut gem, reveals its true

value with continued proximity and polish. Hard to recognize at first glance, but that makes them all the more valuable.”

Seeing his face gently laughing, softer than usual, Yuder thought of someone.

“Are you talking about Zuckerman?”

“Hmm… Yes, Nathan does fit that description.”

Kishiar responded, chuckling with a strange expression.

“I was talking about you, though.”

“…”

“Oh, you never even considered it?”

Yuder was taken aback. He hadn’t expected this. The metaphor of a gemstone felt much more apt than bread. Even so, the expressions Kishiar had used were far too direct and passionate compared to Yuder’s own. Suddenly feeling a surge of overwhelming emotion from within, Yuder quietly rose from his seat. At that, Kishiar burst into laughter.

“You’re so modest about yourself, but how come you manage to uncover plans I thought you wouldn’t notice?”

As Yuder turned to leave, he remembered the voices of his companions, who had worried about him sharing a residence with Kishiar. He felt that their worries had manifested, but in a completely different way. In these moments with Kishiar, Yuder found the atmosphere far too intense, almost overwhelming.

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Chapter 338

‘Another fever?’

Heading to the bathroom, he touched his neck which felt slightly hot, but he couldn’t be sure.

Was this warmth due to the medicine Enon gave him?

Was the previous fever also truly because of it?

–-

Darkness loomed before his eyes, as if immersed in pitch black.

Lost in the haze, Yuder suddenly realized he was lying face down. He never slept in that position. It was strange. As he tried to adjust and rise, someone from behind pressed down on his waist, halting his movement.

Moving his heavy arm to reach behind, his wrist was grabbed and he was pushed down again. At the same time, the bed beneath him quivered, sending a strange sensation throughout his body. Before his mind could recognize what it was, his senses followed the origin of the sensation, rushing downwards.

Below his waist, deeper, and even deeper.

From that depth, an intense shock surged, filling his body with warmth. His heart raced at an incomparable speed, pumping blood fervently. Overwhelmed by the sensation, a breathless gasp escaped from his open lips.

“Ahh…”

It was then he realized the situation he was in. The cold leather gloves pinning his wrists, and the intrusion inside him announced his undeniable presence.

Kishiar.

As the name flashed across his mind, he felt sweat forming all over. A burning sensation filled his head, making everything blurry. His body involuntarily tensed due to an overwhelmingly stimulating scent.

As a force entered deep within him, the sensation inside responded with a pronounced movement. A natural and familiar rhythm, digging deep and then retracting, elicited another gasp from him. Biting his lips did no good to suppress it.

And then, the rhythm continued.

In a world where everything seemed swallowed by darkness except the sensations, his heavy breathing and the breath from the figure behind him felt like the only signs of life. The pleasure was sharp as a knife and deep as a mire. It felt like being wrapped by a boneless sea creature, dragged to hell, then frantically surfacing for air only to be dragged down again.

His mind screamed at the unbearable stimulation, desperately seeking escape, but his body remained still, wrapped up in the movements from behind. His skin seemed to welcome the sensation, letting out sweet cries.

In the midst of such overwhelming confusion, the place he was in seemed to distance itself, echoing with screams. Even as his mind clouded and strength left his hands, the grip on his wrist remained strong.

As his breathing quickened, the initially cold leather became warm, sending shivers down his spine. Clenching his teeth, he

couldn’t prevent the noises that escaped him. What was once unfamiliar began to merge with him, becoming indistinguishable. Like metal being continuously forged upon an anvil, he felt beaten and reshaped.

No matter how much he struggled, all he wanted to hide was becoming more exposed, showing its true self.

Being beaten.

Being exposed.

Rejection. Or ecstasy. Or something else.

His consciousness slowly faded, and strength left his previously hunched body. The hand that was pressing against his waist, when he regained awareness, had unknowingly burrowed into his chest. An unknown liquid, whether it was sweat or something else, scattered with heat over the half-buried cheek on the sheet. Unable to endure any longer, Yuder grasped the hand that was embracing his body.

In a desperate scratch that seemed like a plea, the strained glove was half-peeled off. The exposed back of the hand, much longer and larger than Yuder’s, had bulging bones, and lacked any feel of flesh. The hand changed direction, gripping Yuder’s fingers firmly, making them immobile. A surge of heat overcame him, and a shiver pierced his brain.

At the same time, the blade that had been prodding his insides finally overstepped its bounds.

His head grew light and his eyes moistened involuntarily. Overwhelmed by the tremendous sensation that struck his entire body, Yuder slumped. The pain brought an ecstasy akin to death. His mind went blank, losing grip of who he was, where he was. It was a brief moment, yet it felt so long it was almost unbelievable.

Two hearts beat in unison without missing a beat. A sensation of countless thin tendrils wrapping tightly around him made Yuder lose consciousness for a while.

When he came back to his senses, the inner turmoil persisted. With a horrible tingling pleasure, his vision blurred.

The wet sensation that drenched his abdomen and trickled between his legs felt distant. As he lay there gasping for breath, an approaching finger carefully traced his parted lips. In such a situation, the contact was unbelievably slow.

No matter how Yuder tried to avoid it, when that persistent entity finally reached inside his lips, with the last of his strength, he bit down. The finger hesitated for a moment but didn't dodge the feeble attack. Only when strength left Yuder's jaw did the finger retreat.

He felt drained, as if on the verge of death. His heart raced uncontrollably, and his lungs inflated and deflated to their limits without respite. As he shut his eyes and gasped for air, the intertwined bodies gradually separated.

'…'

Each time what hadn't faded slowly ebbed away, the things that had filled him up flowed out between his legs. His trembling body clenched its teeth, pausing the egress momentarily.

That moment.

Unable to bear that moment of hesitation, Yuder reached behind, grabbing and pulling something harshly. With a jolt and overlapping movement, what was half out slid back, piercing inside.

Unable to bear the shock, the two bodies collapsed intertwined onto the sheet.

Yuder, feeling the weight stack behind him, heard a noise escape his own lips.

Yes. More.

—-

“…”

His mood was terrible from morning.

Yuder stared blankly at the ceiling, his eyes wide open. Without even pulling the covers, he knew what had transpired underneath. He wasn’t a young boy from a distant past, who would wet his bed without doing anything. Rising in his current age with such arousal was inexplicable. Embarrassed beyond belief, he had no desire to get up.

‘Why such a dream?’

His dreams of a past life had occurred several times before, but never had he dreamt so vividly of an intimate relationship. It was simply, as the saying goes, a dream about doing it over and over again, though he couldn’t recall when exactly.

‘…For the first time, I want to believe it’s not a memory from my past life.’

He remembered having done it to the point of exhaustion, but he never felt particularly enthusiastic about it. However, the dream was entirely different. The last voice echoing in his head was sticky and wouldn’t fade away.

Glancing to his side, Kishiar was nowhere to be found, having seemingly already risen. He felt a slight bruise to his pride, having never seen him sleep or wake up, but under the circumstances, it felt like a blessing.

Casually sniffing his wrist, he detected a faint scent, somewhat more robust than usual. It wasn't the sign of an approaching heat period, but it was definitely warm.

'If this is because of the medicine Enon gave me, then what the hell am I supposed to say?'

With a sigh, Yuder took his time to calm himself down before finally getting up. By then, Kishiar appeared, dressed in fresh clothes, with damp hair, greeting him with a smile.

"You're up? You slept in later than usual."

"…Yes."

Seeing the face he least wanted to encounter in such a situation first thing in the morning was a humbling experience.

"So, today… Will you be following the traces of the knights sent by Baron Willhem, as you mentioned yesterday?"

"That's a task for Nathan."

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Kishiar, who'd casually mentioned having other business on his side, suddenly tilted his head upon catching sight of Yuder's face.

"Why do you look so pale?"

The moment Kishiar reached out, Yuder felt a shiver run down his spine reflexively. Without even realizing, Yuder retreated, avoiding the outstretched hand. Even though he knew that the hand in front of him wasn't clad in the cold glove from his dream, the memories from that dream resonated from beyond his conscious mind, ringing in his head. All his efforts to calm his mind seemed fruitless. Yuder avoided Kishiar's gaze and mumbled while staring at the floor.

"I'm sorry. It's nothing."

"It doesn't seem like nothing."

Kishiar, always quick to catch on, clearly wasn't buying the excuse.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

For a moment, Yuder clenched his fist, then slowly released it. Red pupils, which he couldn't see in the dark depths of his dream, were now looking at him, full of concern or perhaps scrutinizing him. His mouth felt dry, and his palms sweaty.

"Yes."

"It happens. A change of environment can sometimes bring about nightmares."

Kishiar responded gently, as if it were truly no big deal.

“Do you also have nightmares, Commander?”

“I’m human, of course I do.”

Even though it was an obvious statement, given the circumstances, it somehow felt very strange. Kishiar, seeing Yuder remain silent, didn’t reach out anymore and instead crossed his arms.

“I plan to attend the salon of the western nobles I was invited to today. But if you’re feeling unwell or have a headache, you don’t need to join me. You can stay here.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“It’s alright. It might actually be easier for everyone to misunderstand that it’s better for you to stay here for a day.”

Kishiar suggested that if needed, he could call Lusan and Enon over for a check-up. The tender reassurance, something Yuder thought he would never receive from this man, left him at a loss for words. Trying to appear as composed as possible, Yuder spoke.

“I don’t even remember what I dreamt about now. I don’t think I need to be examined just for that. I’m truly fine.”

“Just because something isn’t visible doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. My assistant seems to still need to learn more about self-care. So, rest today, as I suggested.”

“Is that an order?”

“It’s a request.”

“…”

“I brought you here so you could rest in a comfortable place. Have you forgotten?”

In the end, Yuder couldn’t out-argue Kishiar. He stood by a window that overlooked the outside, watching Kishiar’s carriage leave. Thanks to Kishiar’s orders to the servants before his departure, a generous amount of food sufficient for at least three people filled the table. The curious glances of the servants, wondering why Yuder remained alone, felt prickly on his back, but he pretended not to notice and lost himself in thought.

‘Was that dream truly my memory?’

The sensations from the dream began to fade swiftly after he woke up and were now quite vague. However, the shock of seeing himself, like a beast overpowered by instinct, growling, biting, scratching, repelling, and then being drawn back, was still vivid.

Did he really behave like that? Was that really him? It wasn’t just the other side that acted like a beast blinded by desire.

In his previous life, Kishiar had been so tenacious that once he started a relationship, he hardly let go. No matter how hard he tried, he would often find himself on the brink of losing consciousness before the night ended. Still, since the accident during the manifestation of his second gender when he clung for days as if in a delirious state, he felt he had never lost control of his consciousness so severely. Had that too been a misconception?

‘Anyway, whether that dream was a memory of my previous life or not… One thing is certain.’

Yuder stood up, reflecting on the dream. It meant that the scene in the dream had stirred him deeply.

How could he have felt that way during such a dream?

“…”

A throbbing pain resided behind his eyes. Yuder touched his throat gently, exhaling deeply.

‘Perhaps… having newly recognized my desire for Kishiar is what led me to this dream.’

Once begun, there’s no turning back. Yuder Aile’s feelings for Kishiar La Orr had advanced to a point where it was challenging to contain.

Perhaps the dream served as a warning, urging him to reflect and realize the reality once again. If the desire he thought was new wasn’t new at all, then what awaited at the end? Perhaps everything he believed was changing was not, and he was merely repeating the same descent into ruin.

With that thought…

Yuder looked down at his sweaty palms. While no qualification was needed to desire and yearn for someone, he felt he was the least suited for such intense passion.

‘I’m overthinking because of a dream. Enough of this.’

The coldness that had enveloped him seemed to have cooled most of the lingering heat inside, but a trace of it remained, discomforting him. Yuder gazed long in the direction Kishiar’s carriage had disappeared before turning away.

“Yuder. Are you planning to stay in bed all day because you spent an intense night with the Commander?”

“Who said that?”

“Who else? The servants who’ve been glaring at this room all day, their eyes almost popping out.”

Not long after finishing his meal, Ever visited. Offering Yuder a small green apple she'd brought, she marveled at the luxury of the room.

"Wow. I thought our room was great, but given that this is the Commander's quarters, it's incredible. How many rooms are interconnected?"

"Six in total, including the bathroom."

"How's the bathroom?"

"See for yourself."

Only after inspecting even the bathroom facilities did Ever return satisfied.

"It's incredible. You could swim in the tub. Have you tried?"

"No."

Thanks to Ever's cheerful voice, Yuder's headache began to subside. Biting into the apple Ever had given him, he inquired about her visit.

"Why did you come all the way here? I thought you went to investigate the rumors."

"I intended to, but we received letters from the people left in Great Sarain Forest. I came to deliver it before going out. And to check if you're genuinely unwell."

"I'm perfectly fine, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I mean, people are truly strange. Once they hold a prejudice, whether Commander and Yuder are together or apart, they must seem odd. I appreciate their easy acceptance, but the fuss they make over it…"

Yuder accepted a few letters she handed to him. Three in total: one each from Gakane, Kanna, and Jimmy. Although they were all delivered by express courier and thus quite small, the letters inside were densely written.

Gakane wrote that he had encountered several monsters in the Great Sarain Forest, but had quickly dispatched them. By the time Yuder read the letter, Gakane mentioned plans to expand his range and hunt monsters in other areas. Yuder had thought that it would be easier for Gakane to lead the members than deal with the Western Mage Union, but Gakane seemed to find the latter easier than expected.

“The mages say that the current monster activity is at the level that was typical in previous years. It seems the news of the decreased monster disturbances has spread. Now, we’re seeing more high-ranking individuals and mercenaries, and the mages say that more of them will come from other regions. But what’s surprising is the number of people who approach us directly to express their gratitude. The small trade hubs reportedly established by the Tain family remain quiet, but we must continue to monitor them.”

After updating the situation, Gakane concluded his letter by inquiring about Yuder’s health. He showed no signs of curiosity about Tainu’s condition or about the circumstances of Baron Willhem.

Next was Kanna’s letter. The content was similar, but it included details only she would mention.

“Yuder, having read more detailed reports here, it seems certain that the Tain family was involved in illegal trades, including human trafficking. I’ve reported the specifics to Commander, so you’ll hear it from him, but the details are truly horrifying. I also gleaned a small hint on where the Star of Nagran might be, and it might not be far from where you are.”

Kanna's handwriting was a bit clumsier than Gakane's. She had only properly learned to write after joining the Cavalry. But Yuder felt a warmth in her awkward script. He could almost hear her voice, filled with deeper concern than Gakane's, and it made him smile faintly.

"I assume by now you should have sight in both eyes. I really worry that you'll just work and not rest properly. I've asked Sister Ever to watch over you, but I won't be at ease."

Kanna planned to depart for Tainu after finishing her task of reading the information there. She emphasized that he should be even healthier by the time they met again, and warned him against lying in his reply, or she'd see right through it.

Lastly, the letter from Jimmy, although filled with clumsy grammar and misspellings, brimmed with passion. He recounted several times, with evident excitement, the story of a monster he faced in the Great Sarain Forest and asked to spar with Yuder when they next met. The letter also contained a few words from other comrades, as relayed by Jimmy.

"What does it say?"

Waiting for Yuder to finish reading, Ever's expression was soft, as if she already knew the answer.

"I've learned that you're going to watch over me, at Kanna's request."

"She promised me a dress she made herself as payment. So, I'm going to take this task very seriously."

Ever playfully waved her own letter in front of him.

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While Yuder was deep in conversation with Ever about the letter, a sudden knock interrupted them. Without waiting for a reply, the door was abruptly flung open, revealing the lord of the mansion they were staying in: Baron Willhem.

Accompanied by a group of his servants, Baron Willhem's gaze swept across the room, settling momentarily on Ever, then on Yuder. His eyebrows knitted ever so slightly. Although he attempted to maintain his composure, the icy coldness in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Hmm. I heard you were too ill to accompany the duke, but you look perfectly well to me."

Ever concealed her displeasure and tucked away the letter. Rising calmly from her seat, Yuder addressed the Baron.

"What brings you here, Baron?"

"How rude of you. To speak without even greeting…"

"Understandable," the Baron interrupted, "Even if he's been directly honored by the Emperor himself, he might not be accustomed to formalities yet."

A servant by Baron Willhem's side pointed out Yuder's disrespect, but the Baron dismissed him with a wave, feigning a magnanimous tone that didn't align with his true demeanor.

"I have matters to discuss with you. I couldn't notify you earlier as this seemed like the only opportune moment. Shall we have a private conversation?"

The suggestion was phrased politely, but its tone was unmistakably commanding.

‘He wants to talk.’

If he visited without notice, especially in Kishiar’s absence and with only Yuder present, the intent was clear. Ever shot a sharp glance at Baron Willhem, then turned her attention to Yuder.

“…Yuder.”

Her brief call held a plea, a wish for him to stay regardless of what Baron Willhem might say. In response, Yuder gave her a brief nod, signaling that everything was okay.

“Very well. Ever, once our conversation is over, I’ll seek you out. Would that be acceptable?”

“Understood. I’ll be in the reception room. See you later.”

Ever rose, offering a cursory nod to Baron Willhem, and left the room, a cold gust following in her wake. Baron Willhem, looking displeased at her departure, signaled for his servants to approach.

Only after they meticulously dusted off the chair Ever had occupied did the Baron seat himself with a flourish of his mustache.

“Ever since learning that you’re the hero of the Great Sarain Forest, I’ve been eager to meet you personally. Fortunately, this opportunity came sooner than expected. You might already know, but I’m Joseph Willhem.”

“I am Yuder Aile.”

While Baron Willhem went on about the illustrious history of the Willhem family, stewards of Tainu for roughly eight generations,

Yuder paid little heed. His only concern was when the Baron would get to the point.

"…Thus, the abnormal monster occurrences beyond the western border this year, which began to infringe upon the Great Sarain Forest, were of great concern to me. I genuinely want to thank you for resolving that issue."

'Is he finally getting to it?'

Just as Yuder was contemplating the idea of gazing outside due to the sheer monotony of the conversation, Baron Willhem broached the topic of the monsters.

"That's not true."

"I've heard that you single-handedly defeated these monsters but were injured in the process. Is that true?"

Baron Willhem's gaze lingered noticeably on Yuder's left eye. Yuder, maintaining a neutral expression, met the Baron's eyes and nodded.

"Yes."

"Even so, having to follow all the way here instead of heading straight back to the capital, it seems Duke Peletta truly values you. How else would he offer his own residence?"

"…"

While it was phrased in a manner of admiration, the underlying meaning was, 'After all the hardships, how humiliating it must be to be held by Duke Peletta.' Yuder remained silent, prompting Baron Willhem to lean in and whisper in a voice feigning sincerity.

“A talent like you, set to lead our Empire, shouldn’t be wasted sitting in a place like this. Duke Tain, impressed by your achievements, has mentioned he shares the same sentiment.”

“Is that so?”

“Can you believe he speaks so progressively about the Awakener? But it’s quite understandable.”

Deciphering Yuder’s reaction, Baron Willhem began to extensively praise Duke Tain. Amid his words suggesting Duke Tain was adventurous and could overlook minor flaws for something of value, Yuder easily discerned his true intent.

‘Someone who’s invested all his assets in high-risk ventures would, of course, be audacious. Hoping for success while turning a blind eye to potential pitfalls is a typical trait of such people.’

In his previous life, Duke Tain had lived comfortably even after Emperor Katchian’s ascension. His family was implicated in an illegal fighting arena scandal, but they were proven uninvolved. Keeping a low profile in the capital due to personal businesses, Yuder never had any reason to be wary of him. But in hindsight, it seemed clear that the support and endorsement of other nobles, including Katchian, allowed him such peace.

Emperor Katchian despised any potential threats, yet showed mercy to those who kept a low profile and collaborated. Among the four ducal families, Duke Tain, who had always prioritized imperial matters without causing any threats to the Emperor’s authority, had played his cards right.

Normally, Yuder wouldn’t have given it a second thought, but the mention left a bitter taste in his mouth because it reminded him of Kishiar.

“…What do you think? Any thoughts?”

Distracted by his memories of the Tain family, Yuder had missed some of Baron Willhem's words. The Baron, noticing Yuder's silence and watching him carefully, tried not to appear intimidated and raised his voice.

"Of course, arranging a meeting with Duke Tain might not be easy. But opportunities don't come often. I'll lay the groundwork; all you have to do is return to the capital and await contact. It shouldn't be that hard, right?"

"So, you're saying… Duke Tain wants to meet me?"

"Exactly."

Baron Willhem finally smiled, sensing they were on the same page. Yuder, however, did not reciprocate. It was almost absurd how this situation was playing out exactly as Kishiar had feared.

"I'm sorry, but that will be difficult."

"What?"

"I am an assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. Everything I've done was out of duty in my capacity there, nothing more. If the Duke wishes to contact me, please speak with the Commander first."

The Baron's eyes widened, his face reddening whether it had to do with Yuder or not.

"What… What's wrong with the Cavalry? Are you suggesting that it should take precedence over the words of Duke Tain right now?"

"So, are you saying that I shouldn't prioritize the wishes of the Commander of the Cavalry, Duke Peletta, over yours?"

For a moment, Baron Willhem was at a loss for words.

'This guy?'

He had assumed Yuder would want to break away from Duke Peletta, hence his attempt at persuasion. He never expected this kind of response.

Logically, Willhem should've been looking down at his counterpart with a calm demeanor, while the latter should've been anxiously hanging on his every word. Yet, the Baron was the one struggling to mask his emotions. Yuder, on the other hand, added insult to injury with his audacious words. Willhem tried to contain his emotions, suddenly realizing he shouldn't underestimate his opponent.

He quickly opened his mouth, trying to hide a vague unease.

"Why do you speak such nonsense? You know that's not what I meant. How can you achieve anything with such rigidity? From your perspective, it might seem like you're defying Duke Peletta, but I assure you, there's nothing to worry about."

"So, you're saying I can tell the Duke about this proposal?"

"No, no! Not that!"

Yuder, watching the flustered Baron Willhem, coldly smirked to himself. From the moment Willhem proposed something that shouldn't be disclosed to Kishiar, it was clear his 'worry-free, good proposal' was anything but. How foolish did he think Yuder was?

"Don't tell His Highness, Duke Peletta, that I told you this. I'll take care of that! So, what I'm trying to say is…"

"My Lord, my apologies for interrupting. There's an urgent message from the mansion."

Suddenly, a servant appeared at the door. The composed man with black hair contrasted sharply with the red-faced, leaning

Willhem. The servant momentarily hesitated, then, responding to an impatient inquiry, finally spoke.

“My Lord, the First Prince of Tain Family has just arrived here.”

“The First Prince?”

Baron Willhem jumped up in shock.

“Duke Tain never sent any notice… What on earth is happening?”

“I’m not sure. The lady of the house is with the prince and awaits you.”

“I understand.”

Responding swiftly, Willhem turned to Yuder, “An unexpected situation has arisen. We’ll pause our discussion for now. But think carefully about what I’ve said. I’ll call upon you again.”

After they departed, Yuder sat for a while, pondering the recent events. Clearly, it had nothing to do with Baron Willhem’s proposal.

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Chapter 341

‘Duke Tain’s first child? Who was that again?’

In his previous life, Tain’s ducal family had faithfully kept their children low-key until Yuder’s death, so his memory of the children was exceedingly faint. It wasn’t a situation where noise erupted like in the case of Apeto’s succession, nor was it a house closely connected with Emperor Katchian like Diarca’s family, so it was all the more so. It was only after Yuder had fumbled with his memory for quite some time that he succeeded in recalling that Duke Tain had about four children.

‘…but I don’t think the successor was a duke’s child.’

According to Yuder’s memory, Duke Tain’s successor was a Duchess. Even though usually the first child takes the position of the successor, there were plenty of cases like Lenore Shand Apeto from his previous life where the younger children became the successor, so it wasn’t that strange.

‘Did he die young? Or did he give up himself?’

Either way, it was impossible to know now, but Yuder was extremely curious as to why the Duke’s first child, who did not become the successor in the previous life of the Tain’s ducal house, had come this far at this time.

Yuder tried to recall more about the first child of the Tain family but finally gave up and left the room. Heading towards the reception room where the members often gathered, Ever jumped up to greet him.

“Yuder! Did the conversation end well?”

As most of the members had gone outside, the reception room was quiet. Yuder opened his mouth to answer after confirming the absence of the servants from the Willhem family.

“Yes.”

“Nothing went wrong, right?”

“The Tain’s family side is showing interest in me and told me to think about it,” he said.

He had easily violated Willhem’s instructions to not tell even the Commander why he had come.

“From the Tain’s ducal family? Is everything okay?”

“It’s something the Commander already anticipated. I have no intention of accepting it, so it’s fine.”

Ever, who had probably guessed why they were showing interest in Yuder, did not remove her furrowed face even after hearing it was fine.

“Still… be careful, Yuder. Don’t forget to report to the Commander as well.”

“Yes.”

“I have to go to the security management team in Tainu now.”

According to Ever, all the guards and knights staying in Tainu were at a place called the security management team, where they imprisoned and decided the punishment for the criminals.

“Have you found a way in?”

“When I asked the Commander for permission, he said I could use his name freely. So I’m planning to go there on the pretext that

the Commander wants to hear opinions related to the knight murder in Great Sarain Forest and take a look at the prison.”

“That’s a good plan.”

“Isn’t it? I realized thanks to the Commander that to do this kind of work well, one must act as brazenly as possible.”

Ever grinned.

“It would have been reassuring if Yuder had come with me, that’s the only regret.”

After Ever left, the annex felt even emptier. Yuder moved to Enon’s room, looking for him, who had not come out to the reception room. As expected, he was inside his quarters.

“Are you taking a rest today and not following the Commander? Is your body feeling that unwell?”

“…”

Hearing the words spat out as soon as he saw his face, he realized that rumors spread incredibly well. Yuder briefly explained the anomaly in his body’s condition that had started the night before.

“I’ve been having a fever since I took the medicine you gave me.”

“I told you that would happen. Is it because your body temperature has risen too much?”

“It’s not that kind of fever.”

“What fever is it then, if not that one?”

Seeing that the other party was about to measure the temperature, Yuder raised a hand to stop Enon, who was

approaching. He hesitated rarely, looked down towards his stomach, and muttered,

“When my sexual desire surges… I keep feeling this kind of heat.”

“…What desire?”

“Sexual desire.”

Enon lowered his hand again. He looked at Yuder with a skeptical expression, as if he was extremely dubious about what he had just heard.

“…That symptom shouldn’t occur just because you took it, should it?”

“Are you sure?”

“I can’t completely guarantee it, but usually, that’s the case. Do you think I would give you something containing an aphrodisiac?”

Yuder, who had been believing that the fever and strange dreams he’d had since yesterday were somewhat caused by the medicine, kept silent for a moment. He didn’t think that Enon was lying, but there could be unforeseen consequences, even unknown to the one who caused them.

“So, is there a chance that I had a strange reaction because my physical condition is different from that of ordinary people?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be listening to this nonsense!”

Enon, raising his voice in anger, grabbed Yuder’s clothes and forcibly sat him down. After measuring the heat of Yuder’s neck and forehead, he declared with a scrunched-up face that there was currently no problem with Yuder’s body temperature.

“Your body temperature is normal, but do you still feel that heat?”

“No, I don’t feel anything wrong right now.”

“What about strength recovery or other aspects?”

“My strength seems a bit more restored than before I ate, but my eyes still can’t see.”

“Okay, so when did you feel this sexual desire?”

Yuder, once again drawing out a moment of silence, opened his dry lips.

“Do I really need to discuss this?”

“If you felt it towards me, don’t tell me.”

“It’s not that.”

Enon, who had wriggled the end of his lips upon receiving a firm answer, took a deep breath.

“That’s a relief, but if you’re claiming that sudden sexual desire arose due to the medicine I gave you, you’ll have to explain why, when, and how it happened. Eh? Do you think I want to hear such a thing? I need to know to judge if there’s a real problem!”

He was right. In the end, Yuder had to provide a proper answer.

“It happened when I encountered a specific person. And… it also happened after dreaming in the morning.”

“What kind of dream? An erotic one? Did that specific person even appear in it?”

Although it was not something that could be explained lightly, Enon’s expression wasn’t entirely wrong. Yuder fell silent, and Enon

furrowed his brows even more.

“…Is it true?”

He uttered in astonishment, then fell silent for a while.

“…Let’s make this clear. It’s not because of the medicine. It might feel that way if your body temperature rises more than usual when you’re excited, but it’s not acting as an aphrodisiac. That’s certain.”

“But before this, I never suddenly felt a surge of heat or had such dreams.”

“I’m not sure if I have to be the one to tell you this, but humans tend to react that way when a target for their sexual desire appears, even if it’s unexpected.”

“…Who says?”

“Who cares who? Anyway, your condition proves it, doesn’t it!”

“But before…”

“Just because it didn’t happen before doesn’t mean it must be the same this time. The guy who claimed he’d change the future is now refusing to accept that he himself has changed and is blaming the poor medicine!”

At such a direct statement, Yuder closed his mouth.

“Anyway, such things don’t just happen without any signs. You should recognize that yourself and deal with it appropriately. I can’t heal you from such a problem.”

“…I understand. I’ve properly grasped that the medicine isn’t the issue, so I’ll handle the rest on my own.”

Yuder stood up from his seat.

“Hold on. But you, that person you’re talking about…”

Enon, who had been mumbling, lowered his voice as his eyes met Yuder’s and eventually stopped speaking. He stared at Yuder without blinking and, moments later, let out an exasperated yell, tousling his hair.

“No, never mind. Go, just go.”

“Why are you acting like that?”

“I’ll dislike it if I’m right, and I’ll dislike it even more if I’m wrong. Get out.”

The door closed roughly in front of him. Staring blankly at the closed door, moments later, it opened again, and Enon forcibly placed several pills in Yuder’s hand.

“Take these!”

“You should tell me what these are.”

“An aphrodisiac suppressant.”

And the door closed again. Yuder looked down at the pills designed to be swallowed without water and placed them in his pocket.

Kishiar’s residence was still unoccupied by its owner. However, in his stead, there stood an unknown and uninvited guest who had been waiting. As Yuder returned to the dwelling, the visitor opened his eyes wide and stood upright.

“Are you Yuder Aile?”

“Yes, but… who are you?”

Yuder examined the stranger warily. He appeared to be about the same age as him but was a bit taller. Seeing the golden-red hair and much darker crimson eyes than Kishiar's, he felt as if he somehow knew who the person was.

"I am Pruelle van Tain. I came to ask about joining the Cavalry."

There was only one person who could have the surname van Tain and appear so suddenly. Yuder looked at the first son of the Tain family, whom he was seeing for the first time in both his previous and current life, and thought that today seemed to be a day filled with unexpected encounters.

"…Did you come alone by any chance?"

"Did you wish me to bring my servants? I thought it would be more convenient to talk if I came alone."

"No."

Yuder, who was looking at the young stranger that seemed to possess a slightly different personality than he had guessed, let out a brief sigh.

"Come in, for now."

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Chapter 342

Upon close inspection, Pruelle, the firstborn of the Tain Ducal house, was quite distinct from other young nobles in both appearance and temperament. Most of the noble youth Yuder had seen so far had extraordinary looks like Kiolle, Aishes, or Lenore, but often had less impressive personalities. Even in rare cases like Revlin Shand Apeto, where the character was miraculously good, their appearance was as smooth as porcelain dolls, allowing one to guess their noble lineage.

However, Pruelle was relatively ordinary, possessing features that could have led to the misconception that he was just a common young man, if not for his family's characteristic red hair and eyes. His clear freckles on the bridge of his nose and a seemingly sincere smile added to that image.

But Yuder read a slight tension in Pruelle's smile, rigid and anxious. Although he seemed to manage his expression well, like the child of a noble family should, maintaining composure for a long time in front of a piercing gaze was not an easy task. Such control typically developed over time.

A bold and secretive youth who had come alone, claiming that he wanted to inquire about joining the Cavalry. What was his intention?

Yuder quietly opened his mouth towards Pruelle, who was watching him as intently as Yuder was observing him.

"You said you came because you want to join the Cavalry?"

"Yes. I want to know how to join the Cavalry, like Apeto's third son."

At the mention of Revlin, who was in the capital, Yuder's eyebrows momentarily furrowed and then relaxed. Pruelle continued, trying not to miss the slight change in Yuder's expression.

"I am also an Awakener, just like him. I've been hiding it in my family, but after watching Apeto's third son, I think I don't need to hide anymore."

"Then why didn't you contact us in the capital but come now?"

"I had to wait for the appropriate time. If I had suddenly visited the Cavalry in the capital, I would have been suspected, but here, even my father would not find it strange."

Pruelle mentioned that he had spent a brief time in Tainu as a child. He had occasionally made sudden visits to Tainu, so Duke Tain and Baron Willhem would think of this incident as an extension of that, he added.

"It's not strange to suddenly become interested when I hear that the hero of the western border, the Cavalry, is here while I'm in town. Moreover, if the person who defeated the giant monster alone is taking a rest alone, anyone would want to meet him."

His words were consistent. But somehow, Yuder felt that was not all there was to it. He stared into Pruelle's dark eyes, curious about the tension hidden behind the sorrowful smile.

"I understand what you're saying. But if you want to reveal that you're an Awakener, you don't necessarily have to join the Cavalry. It's hard to understand why you want to come here, leaving your family behind."

"If it's because I'm the first-born, you don't have to think it's strange."

Pruelle answered frankly, lifting the corners of his lips.

“If I reveal that I’m an Awakener, I will immediately lose my qualification to succeed. Maybe I’ll even be ostracized for life. I may be hiding it well now, but there’s no guarantee I won’t be found out, right? I never wanted to succeed the Duke in the first place.”

The bold statement momentarily chilled the surrounding air. Yuder looked into Pruelle’s eyes and confirmed that he was speaking the truth.

“You really have no interest in the duke’s position?”

“If I were to join the Cavalry, sure, it would turn the family upside down. Father and Mother would be angry too. But that’s just it. Now is the most suitable time to break free since I’m not the heir, but merely the first son.”

“So… you’re saying you want to join the Cavalry instead of inheriting the family because you have no desire to inherit the family title?”

“Much more direct than what I heard from Baron Willhem. Yes, that’s exactly it.”

“You’re speaking very dangerously. Don’t you think that if that happens, there will be numerous disputes over the heir’s position, just like in Lord Revlin’s time?”

The relationship between the Cavalry, commanded by the Emperor’s brother Kishiar, and the four major ducal houses had always been an unbridgeable gap. The temporary membership of Revlin Shand Apeto had solidified this fact, resulting from the quarrels between the Apeto family and Kishiar. Of course, in Revlin’s time, it was an incident deliberately provoked as part of a scheme to destroy the Apeto family, so the subsequent disputes were also part of a premeditated plan. But this time was different.

As the first son of another house, Pruelle's will in this matter could not ignore political problems. Pruelle would not be ignorant of this fact, but the reason for his insistence on entering a place akin to the family's enemy seemed to be something more.

'…No. Perhaps he targeted that aspect from the beginning?'

Yuder looked at Pruelle anew. The tension hidden behind his smile had deepened a little more than before.

The insight sparked in his mind through years of experience.

"You don't just want to get out of the family…"

Pruelle maintained his silence at Yuder's words.

"Is it perhaps because you mentioned Lord Revlin first?"

"Yes. I told you. After witnessing that incident, I was motivated to think I could do it too."

The young man, who finally erased his smile as he interrupted Yuder's words, looked cold and listless, as if the cheerful first impression had been a lie.

"Based on my observations of a series of events that have occurred, I concluded that His Majesty the Emperor made a deal with Duke Peletta and the Cavalry involving Apeto's third son. So, if Apeto has changed as it has now, I want to make the same deal."

Yuder felt the need to slightly revise his initial impression of Pruelle. He was far from ordinary. Hidden beneath his seemingly average appearance was a remarkably clear judgment.

"…It doesn't seem like something I should decide on. You'll have to come back when the Commander is here."

"I thought you would answer that way."

Pruelle didn’t press Yuder to make a decision immediately.

“When will Duke Peletta return?”

“He should return by today.”

“Would it be alright if I come to see him late at night?”

“I will convey your request, but I cannot give a definitive answer.”

“That’s fine. Even that much is good. If he grants me an audience, we’ll have a more detailed discussion then.”

Pruelle nodded his head.

“I’m glad I came to see you first. I was curious not only about the hero of Great Sarain Forest but also about who would share accommodation with Duke Peletta.”

Yuder paused momentarily. There was no hint of the disdain in Pruelle’s eyes that one might see in Baron Willhem or other Western nobles.

“…So, have you judged what kind of person I am?”

“At the very least, it doesn’t look like you are the type to bow down to authority and spread your legs, as I had heard. Even when I introduced myself as the first son of the Tain Ducal house, you weren’t surprised at all. Your tone is polite now, but your eyes look as if you could kill me whenever you want. There’s no reason for someone frightened by my status or pitiful power to do that.”

“…”

“There are many things in the world you can’t understand unless you see them for yourself. My father will probably never know in his lifetime.”

Rising from his seat, Pruelle smiled again and extended his hand.

“I won’t ask you to believe in my intentions immediately, but please convey my message to Duke Peletta. I’d at least like to meet him.”

Yuder looked down at the hand but did not take it. Instead, he spoke.

“I realize I haven’t yet heard what your ability is.”

“You’re very cautious. I suppose that’s expected from a Cavalry member who has met various Awakened individuals.”

Pruelle withdrew his hand, answering with a smiling face.

“But there’s no need to worry. My ability is transformation.”

“…Into what exactly?”

“I can transform into anyone I’ve met.”

In the blink of an eye, as Yuder opened his eyes after closing them briefly, he saw that Pruelle’s form had changed to that of Baron Willhem.

“See? It’s precise, right?”

The voice, the clothes, everything was indistinguishable from Baron Willhem that he had seen earlier. Upon closing and reopening his eyes, Baron Willhem reverted back to the young man with golden-red hair. The change was so swift, it felt as though he’d dreamed it.

“…”

“I can’t maintain it for long. To change perfectly, a lot of concentration is required. But it’s quite useful when I want to hide

and go somewhere, like this time.”

The fact that Pruelle answered so candidly must have been a demonstration of the trust he was extending to Yuder. Yuder gazed at him for a long while before nodding.

“I see. You possess a rare ability.”

“Thanks for the compliment. Since my desire to leave my family and join the Cavalry is sincere, I find myself happier than I thought to receive such praise.”

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Chapter 343

Awakened individuals possessing transformation abilities were something Yuder had encountered a few times in his past life. However, the cases where they could transform into humans were exceedingly rare. Most commonly, they could change into something resembling a specific animal or object, and some had even transformed into monstrous appearances to commit various crimes.

A common trait among them was that the more diverse their transformations, the quicker they reached the limits of their concentration, resulting in a shorter duration of the transformation. To achieve a perfect transformation, one had to be well-acquainted with the subject. Pruelle's ability did not seem to diverge significantly from this standard, but the mere fact that he could transform into a human was considered of considerable worth.

'That's why Nahan's illusion ability was so extraordinary.'

Nahan's illusion had a similar effect to transformation by changing the perception of targeted subjects within a specified range. Not only was the mental flexibility to develop the illusionary ability to such an extent impressive, but the truly remarkable aspect was the strong mental fortitude that supported it.

Mental strength refers to the willpower that can be exerted in an unshakable state of mind. Yuder guessed that Nahan's strong mental strength came from his unwavering beliefs. Even though they might be somewhat distorted, his intense stubbornness and faith were the foundation, enabling his abilities to exert such power. It was in the same context that Kanna's abilities had greatly advanced since her will had strengthened upon becoming the Deputy Commander of the Jung Division.

‘So, conversely, that could also become a weakness…’

Yuder thought that the transformation ability Pruelle had demonstrated might be backed by a willpower that ordinary people wouldn’t even consider, most likely very strong. Regardless of how long he had been awakened, if he could already wield power at that level, there was enough potential for him to become an extraordinary talent that no one could match, depending on his training. The fact that such a talent had gone unnoticed and unrecorded in his previous life seemed a waste to the former Cavalry Commander.

What had happened to him that he not only wished to leave the family he was born and raised in but also spoke of wanting to upend it like Apeto? Yuder thought long and hard about the brief emotion revealed by the seemingly calm young man, and the will that he might be harboring behind it.

“Pruelle Van Tain, the first child of the Tain family. He’s known for being extremely restrained in his social activities; he has come a long way,”

Returning from a salon hosted by Western nobles, Kishiar recited this information as soon as he heard that Pruelle Van Tain had been there.

“The Tain family as a whole is known for this, but the current Duke and Duchess of Tain particularly do not seem to care about their children. There’s almost no information about the children, including the first child, throughout their growing years. They don’t appear in society, have no close friends, and thus have virtually no presence.”

“So, they neglected their children?”

“You could say it’s a liberal atmosphere if you want to put it nicely.”

Unpinning the clasp of his cloak draped over his shoulders, Kishiar turned with a chilly smile.

“But hearing what Tain’s eldest child came all this way to say, it seems likely that he doesn’t see it that way.”

“Are you thinking of meeting him?”

“It seems I must. I’m curious about what he has to say, and the cunning move of coming to you first to deliver his message is quite intriguing.”

Kishiar, having wiped his hands with a wet towel, approached Yuder and sat down. Throughout the day, three people sat there facing Yuder, but none felt as distinctive as Kishiar. He leaned back, relaxed, as if he were the master of everything that existed in that place, and sighed deeply with his eyes narrowed. The warmth flickering in his eyes, now slightly tired as compared to before he left, was like the flames of a brazier.

“So… aside from meeting with a stranger, did my assistant do nothing else today?”

“I met with Ever and Enon for a moment as well.”

Yuder first explained about the letters received from colleagues when he met with Ever. However, he did not want to elaborate on having received an aphrodisiac suppressant from Enon, so he simply mentioned, “I heard that there is no significant correlation between the fever that started yesterday and the medicine.”

“That’s good… It’s fortunate that you seem to feel much better after resting.”

Yuder hesitated for a moment before opening his mouth.

“How were you, Commander?”

“As boring as I expected.”

The response came back immediately.

“Perhaps I couldn’t bear the gloomy reaction, so I had to listen to Petrikun’s Aria five times in a row.”

Petrikun was a general known to have lived in the distant past, famous for his dramatic downfall when he was stabbed by a male lover after losing a crucial battle due to indulging in hedonistic pursuits. His story was often sung in songs and poems, even now.

“…You must have been uncomfortable.”

“It’s fine. Sorry to say, but I wasn’t listening to them at all.”

Kishiar replied with a smile, lifting the corners of his mouth.

“An unreached spear cannot hurt its target.”

“…”

“More than that, I was much more worried about you.”

Yuder felt a momentary trembling sensation at the tips of his fingers. His heart ached slightly due to an emotion different from the reflexive heat he felt in the morning.

“It seems like you got much better during your rest from what I can see, but it might not be the case from your own judgment… How is it? Do you think it was good to rest today?”

If a gentle warmth could conquer a person faster than a cold blade, Kishiar was undoubtedly the best striker in that aspect.

Yuder lightly bit his lower lip, then exhaled deeply and opened his mouth.

“Yes. Thanks to your concern, I rested well. I feel… better, I think.”

The experience of stating that his mood had improved felt strangely unfamiliar, and his words hardly flowed. Had anyone ever shown so much interest in his mood?

The reality of being placed at the very center of attention of a single person felt like being a kettle burning on a hot wood fire. In some ways, it was more painful than being a boiling kettle, simply because that one person was Kishiar.

“Alright. Now let’s enjoy a delicious dinner and make our hearts even happier.”

Kishiar cheerfully pulled the bell cord to call the servants.

“If I say I came back early because I wanted to have dinner with you, would you believe me?”

Though his attitude seemed like a joke, the likelihood that it was true with Kishiar was high. He indeed returned earlier than expected.

“…Did you say that at the gathering and then come back?”

“Of course. The Aria was getting too long, and I thought I might miss the time, so I said that there will be many opportunities to listen to songs, but the honor of dining with a waiting beauty and tonight’s dinner can only be enjoyed once. Everyone was shocked.”

“…”

Kishiar laughed mischievously, his face full of joy.

When the servants of Baron Willhem entered, he ordered a few dishes made from the special products of the West that Yuder did not know about, saying that he wanted to eat them. Later, it turned

out that they were all desserts made from ingredients he had never seen before, each one so sweet that it made the tongue tingle. It was to the point where he doubted whether that was the only information he had obtained from attending a gathering of Western aristocrats.

It was clear that Willhem was somewhat biased in judging Kishiar's assistant's taste, but Yuder silently moved his hand as usual and swallowed the food placed before him.

"The eldest son of the house of Tain seems to have no intention of coming yet, so in the meantime, I'll have to read the report letters from Great Sarain Forest," said Kishiar, who had finished his meal much faster than Yuder, as he unfolded the small letters he had taken out from his pocket. Naturally, there were many more letters than those Yuder had received.

"Kanna says she seems to have found circumstantial evidence related to the illegal trade of the Tain Duke's house. Is that true?"

"Mm… it seems so," Kishiar replied indifferently after quickly flipping through a few letters.

"Based on the information we extracted from the thousand pieces we discovered, we searched a few more places. There, we found the routes where the sold people and drugs had been exchanged. It seems to be headed toward Tainu via a base in Great Sarain Forest. Our judgment that there would be an intermediate base here has become even more certain."

"Nahan and the Star of Nagran side must already know this information."

"It's a matter of who finds that intermediate base first," Kishiar murmured, folding the letters.

"Baron Willhem is acting as if such a thing doesn't exist, but the words of the nobles I met in the salon were different."

“Did you find out something?”

“Their words were…”

Just then, a soft knock was heard from outside. It was the servants returning to clear away the empty plates. The servants who entered during the moment Kishiar paused hurriedly cleared the dishes and straightened up before leaving, but one servant did not leave with the others, staying behind to tidy the tablecloth.

After hearing the door close behind him a moment later, the servant, who had been left alone adjusting the tablecloth, looked up. He stared directly at Kishiar for a brief moment, then lowered his head to offer a bow.

“…I have the honor of meeting you for the first time, Your Highness Duke Peletta. Please forgive the rudeness of meeting you in this way.”

“Are you Tain’s first child?”

“I am Pruelle Van Tain.”

The man, who had calmly responded while fiddling with the tablecloth, soon reverted to his original appearance in the blink of an eye. Seeing the golden-red hair, red eyes, and distinct freckles of the young man’s face, Kishiar tilted his head and smiled, a completely different expression from when he faced Yuder.

“Indeed. Just as I heard from my assistant, you possess an interesting ability.”

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“Indeed. You possess the interesting ability I heard about from my assistant.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

“So… I’m curious as to why you’ve come all this way to propose a deal.”

Pruelle did not beat around the bush. He had secretly slipped away from the main residence and needed to return as quickly as possible.

“As you’ve probably already heard from your assistant, I wanted to leave my family and receive protection. However, it’s not just for my own sake that I want to live. I’ve come here because I want to overthrow my father and protect my siblings’ future.”

“Siblings?”

At Kishiar’s question, the corner of Pruelle’s mouth tightened stiffly.

“Externally, I have three known siblings, but in reality, there’s one more, making us five in total. The second, Priscilla; the third, Priam; and the fourth, Phileban are much more discerning than I am, and suitable for succession. But the youngest, Nipollen… he was born with a family-specific illness that made communication with others somewhat difficult. Therefore…”

“You hid his existence.”

At Kishiar’s flatly uttered words, Pruelle acquiesced with dark eyes.

“Yes. My parents have never met Nipollen since his birth, and I wonder if they even remember him now. To them, my other siblings and I are probably not much different, but I thought it was okay.”

As Kishiar had said, Duke Tain had no interest in his children, even to the point of being bothered by their very existence.

Hence, Pruelle and his siblings were left to fend for themselves, typically growing up separately from their parents under the pretext of recovery at a villa or different regions until adulthood. Those who took care of and educated them were frequently changed almost every year so as not to get unnecessarily attached. They had neither relatives their age to socialize with nor friends at an appropriate time, so even after their social debut, they wandered around without any significant connections or interests.

However, an exceptional circumstance was that all five siblings had always been together, and thus their relationship as siblings was incredibly strong.

“I’ve been aware since childhood that I was not the person to salvage this family. So, when the time came, I planned to recommend Priscilla as the successor and quietly live with the other siblings.”

But that small hope was threatened and seemed unlikely to be fulfilled. His father, Duke Tain, had become increasingly absorbed in speculative investments.

“My father never tried to share family information with us, who would inherit the family someday. Then, one day, he suddenly called me, saying that since I had grown up, he thought it was time to send all the other spare children to foreign countries.”

By that time, Duke Tain’s investments in foreign countries had tied up most of his assets. To gain more benefits in a market where vast sums of money were exchanged, he willingly decided to give

away his children to foreign powers. To put it nicely, it would be a union through marriage, but it was a crude and foolish deal for a duke of the empire to choose.

“That’s when I realized it. Even the matter of passing on the family wasn’t that important to my father.”

To Duke Tain, his children were merely strangers, like garbage cleaners who would take what was left after he died. Everything belonging to the House of Tain had to be in his hands until his death. As long as the one to carry on the family was of Tain’s bloodline, it didn’t matter whether they were his biological offspring or not.

Pruelle, too, had never felt much emotion due to his parents’ indifference, perhaps because he had inherited such blood. Until then, the only thing that mattered to him were his siblings. However, he belatedly realized that responding in such a way was only to his own detriment.

After much difficulty using the name of the firstborn, his late investigation revealed that the family’s financial situation was on the brink of collapse at any moment. The power, honor, and extensive connections brought by history, amassed from previous generations, were merely hiding the fragile embankment.

Pruelle couldn’t bear the burden of a family that could collapse at any moment. He did not want to follow his father’s nonsensical words. But his options were exceedingly limited, as he had neither built up any power nor gathered strength within the family.

“If I publicly reveal that I am an Awakener, Father will be unable to fulfill his intent to send away all my siblings except me. He must officially designate an heir to keep things quiet, so there will be a temporary reprieve. During that time, I want to overthrow my father, who is blinded by greed and seeking to destroy everything.”

“How?”

Kishiar asked. Pruelle's dark eyes dimmed.

"I thought that His Majesty Emperor and Duke Peletta might want the same thing as me through the work of the third son of Apeto. Unlike Apeto, Duke Tain is good at hiding his faults and he involves many outsiders of the Empire, so you two would surely need an insider. I will be that person."

"Interesting. But what can a firstborn, who has nothing but a name, do? If you reveal that you are an Awakener, you might lose even that," Kishiar said, his words harsh yet piercing the reality.

Pruelle calmly responded, biting his lip slightly as if he had anticipated this.

"Having nothing but a name will make it unlikely that anyone will be on guard against me. The internal workings are currently divided into three factions, and if we use them well, I believe we can find a faction to support us. The same goes for my siblings."

"Three factions?"

"The first supports and aids my father's work. Including Baron Willhem and some of the Tain families, it probably includes foreign figures involved in trade and important matters with my father. The second faction, comprising many within the family, is not particularly interested in either side. Theorado, the current Commander of the Imperial Knight, is representative of those who could be either enemies or allies, depending on the situation. The last faction opposes my father's actions and includes long-serving family retainers and a significant number of Tain families."

Pruelle's voice continued coldly, revealing his surprisingly objective judgment of the situation, given his previous lack of interest in family matters. Kishiar seemed to agree, silently lifting the corner of his lips.

“Even after I’ve told you this, to Your Grace, I will just be that father’s child. You will probably find my motives and desires to be suspicious and superficial. But please remember that the people of the Tain family, when they find the one thing that matters in life, will never let it go.”

Having finished speaking, Pruelle bowed his head. Kishiar looked down at his red hair and maintained a long silence.

“You said that your siblings are what’s most important to you. Are they so precious?”

“More precious than my life.”

Pruelle answered without hesitation.

“And the truth is… I’m not the only one among us who is an Awakener.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“As I mentioned earlier, the youngest, Nipollen, is also an Awakener. That child finds it more difficult to hide his abilities than I do, so honestly, I don’t know how long we can conceal them. Therefore… my desire to join the Cavalry is also for that child’s sake.”

Kishiar tapped lightly on the table. Yuder knew that this was a habitual action when he was lost in thought.

“The information you’ve given is interesting enough, but haven’t you considered that in the worst case, you might just be used and not be able to protect your siblings?”

“If either side reaches the worst outcome, the result will be the same. Losing my siblings and surviving alone, I’ll only inherit a family ruined by my father, and fleeing together is improbable. But the third

son of Apeto, even without anything, has neither lost his life nor become miserable. Then… wouldn't this be the relatively better opportunity?"

At those words, Kishiar's tapping fingers finally stopped. The eyes that had been concealing his thoughts with a trace of a smile deepened a little more.

"The matter of Apeto's third son seems to have made a profound impression on you."

"I attended every trial that followed and watched the results."

Pruelle calmly confessed.

"I heard everything Apeto's third son said in the courtroom. You would not know how it came to me, cornered in a dead-end alley, as a form of hope."

"Hope."

After murmuring, echoing Pruelle's word, Kishiar turned his gaze to Yuder.

"What does the assistant think?"

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“How does the assistant think about it?”

As the question was suddenly tossed to Yuder, who had been silently listening all this time, Pruelle’s gaze also turned towards him. With a look that held both desperation and surprise, Yuder felt a slight confusion. It was clear that Kishiar’s will was almost determined, so he couldn’t understand why his opinion needed to be publicly heard.

“I don’t think it’s a matter for me to comment on.”

“Say anything you want. There must be something you were curious about while listening, isn’t there?”

It was clear that Kishiar wouldn’t let go without hearing something from him. Yuder thought for a moment before speaking.

“…Understood. May I then ask a question?”

“As long as it’s something I can answer.”

Pruelle quickly replied.

“From what I heard, it doesn’t seem like Duke Tain had been interested in investing originally, but I wonder if my understanding is correct.”

“My father… I know he has always liked to gamble.”

Pruelle responded, his eyes focused far away, as if recalling something.

“He was deeply immersed in various hobbies, from horse racing, tournaments, to various gambling games held at the nobles’ gatherings. He still frequents those places but began to take investing seriously only a few years ago after a trade-related investment in the southern region greatly succeeded.”

“It was when the maritime trade between the Southern country and the Empire was hugely successful.”

As Kishiar mumbled as if knowing something, Pruelle answered, “Yes, that’s correct.”

“From that time on, foreign merchants began to frequent the House of Tain. My father places great trust in the information and advice they provide.”

“He even said that they shared the family’s interests.”

“Yes. I know that their influence has been exerted on many of the current investments.”

Yuder looked back on the memories of his past life. Since Emperor Katchian took the throne, the Empire had been trading with other countries much more actively for a while. Katchian had poured effort into commercial policies with the goal of recovering the devastated western region and initiating changes in the Empire, receiving praise for this new direction, completely opposite to the previous imperial policies. Yuder remembered that Emperor Katchian was very pleased with this praise.

‘If the advice was from Duke Tain’s side… I roughly understand why the family didn’t fail.’

The money invested to achieve that policy was truly enormous. However, the ambitious policy did not end well. The failure was due to the fact that Katchian’s policy didn’t bring about effective results without sufficient disaster recovery. Only a few, including the nobles,

made money during that period, and the collapsed villages and forests in the west took a long time to recover. As those praising and criticizing Emperor Katchian became starkly divided, Yuder had to visit the imperial palace more frequently to receive ‘secret missions’. It was a chaotic time…

Yuder exhaled deeply, erasing the uncomfortable memory. Pruelle asked if there was anything more he was curious about, and Yuder shook his head, thanking him with a mere expression of gratitude.

After hearing Pruelle’s words, Kishiar had been deeply lost in thought. Yuder wondered what extraordinary thoughts might be passing beneath his long, golden-shadowed eyelashes, but he silently waited until Kishiar emerged from his contemplation and opened his mouth.

“Indeed. Then… It seems the time has come to make a choice.”

Upon hearing Kishiar’s words, Pruelle began to tense up sharply.

“Tain’s firstborn.”

“Yes.”

“Just like Apeto’s third son Revlin, I can’t accept you as a member right away. But… It’s possible to grant temporary membership until the official recruitment next time.”

Pruelle’s eyes, which had been rigidly fixed at the beginning, trembled at the very last word. He slowly opened his mouth to ask if he understood correctly.

“Does that mean…”

“It means the deal is concluded.”

“Ah…”

Finally, Pruelle’s face revealed all sorts of emotions that he had hidden until now. Kishiar smoothly continued speaking.

“By the Emperor’s grace and the name of God, I swear to ensure your safety and protection along with your siblings. The path ahead may be perilous, but if the youngest, who finds it hard to hide his abilities, wants it, he can be protected within the Cavalry in advance. Do you want that?”

After a moment unable to speak, he immediately knelt and pressed his lips to the hem of Kishiar’s garment.

“Yes. Please… I sincerely thank you for your mercy…”

While watching this, Yuder felt a very strange sensation. He didn’t know what had happened to Pruelle in his previous life, but since his younger sister had become the successor, his awakening must have come at some cost. Whether he chose this path himself or was forced into it, it hadn’t ended well; but now, in this life, it seemed that it might not happen again. The realization suddenly loomed large.

Because Revlin, who had died quietly in his previous life, survived and proudly stood in the court, another person was standing here now. The chance to protect those who had courageously stepped forward and move towards a greater future was all because Kishiar La Orr was alive and well.

Yuder looked at Kishiar, who was gesturing Pruelle to stand. As he took a deep breath, his heart continued to beat loudly.

“Where are your siblings now?”

“The Tain children are in the capital, but Nipollen… actually, he came with me.”

Pruelle said with a slightly embarrassed face. Yuder was not the only one surprised by this.

“He came with you? I didn’t hear that.”

“Even Baron Willhem doesn’t know Nipollen is here. He’s currently using his ability, so he’s not easily noticeable to others.”

“What’s the ability?”

Kishiar asked, not hiding his interest, and Pruelle obediently answered.

“It’s similar to mine… but there’s some difference. He can only transform into a specific animal, like a cat we used to keep.”

Perhaps because of their similar abilities, Nipollen only found stability when he was near Pruelle; otherwise, he couldn’t control his ability properly. So Pruelle had brought his sibling, transformed into a cat, all the way here.

“He seems to find it harder to maintain his original appearance after awakening his ability. When he’s with me, perhaps because our abilities are similar, he stabilizes quickly, but with others, he can’t control it properly. It might be due to an innate illness from birth.”

This was an extraordinarily rare case among those with transformation abilities. If someone was more comfortable being a cat, then it was probably better for them to come here than to stay in the capital.

‘It wasn’t like he had any significant offensive abilities, and if he could only transform into a cat, I could understand why his sibling would be so worried.’

Kishiar’s expression changed slightly, as if he had had a similar thought.

“Then I hope to meet with him tomorrow. The sooner, the better; it will ease your mind, I think.”

“I would truly appreciate that.”

“I’ll come find you tomorrow, so wait for me. Until then, I would like you to investigate the ‘secret trade’ of the Tain House, which is taking place here.”

It was Kishiar’s first request and a test for the one who had boarded the ship. A sharp look passed between the eyes of Pruelle, as if he had caught on to the meaning.

“I have heard news that His Grace discovered circumstances where three knights of our house were killed in Great Sarain Forest, accompanied by his cavalry. Is that what you’re referring to?”

“One could say that. Although Baron Willhem spoke as if he had no idea what they were doing in Great Sarain Forest, I think otherwise.”

He had already moved beyond thinking otherwise and was gathering evidence, but he did not mention that part, probably to test Pruelle’s abilities. Pruelle seemed to organize his thoughts for a moment before standing up and bowing politely.

“I understand. I know what I must do. I’ll strive to live up to your expectations and await your visit tomorrow.”

Yuder escorted Pruelle, who looked much happier than when he had arrived, to the door of the lodging. Pruelle thanked Yuder with a flushed face.

“I really owe you one today. If not for you, His Grace the Duke wouldn’t have listened so easily.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Nonsense. Because I saw you first, I was able to have a certainty beyond my imagination about what kind of person Duke Peletta is.”

After a small smile, he left one last meaningful remark.

“I’m glad I saw you myself. I’ve never looked forward to tomorrow before, but now, for the first time, I’m excited.”

He transformed into the appearance of a servant, as he had been when he first came in, and left the annex. Yuder made sure he got back all right before returning to the lodging. Kishiar was looking at the fireplace, where no fire had been lit, lost in thought.

“Commander? Are you tired?”

“No, just lost in thought for a moment.”

Kishiar finally looked up and smiled.

“They say they don’t often use magic stoves in the West, and it seems true. This stove isn’t for magic stones, but an old wooden wall stove left as it was.”

“…I see.”

Yuder’s response was slightly delayed, having never paid much attention to stoves in his life. Now that he thought about it, it seemed that magic stone stoves, usually set apart in a corner, were rarely seen in the West. This was in stark contrast to Kishiar’s office, where the magic stone stove was always in the middle of the room, always burning magic stones.

“Do you know what happened when magic stone stoves were first invented?”

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“I don’t know.”

When Yuder answered honestly, Kishiar raised his head and smiled.

“The one who first made a stove capable of igniting and burning magic stones lived near the mine of magic stones. Up until then, the low-quality magic stones, which were not worth selling, were all buried in the ground. But he discovered that the poor were picking up this trash to use in the stove instead of firewood.”

Even though the magic stones were of low grade, they still contained a faint magic power. When the magic stones were put in the stove, the flames didn’t burn as hot as when wood was used, but they retained their warmth for a much longer time. Though the heat was not enough for cooking, it had some utility for the poor.

The practicing mage, who found a way to make better use of the low-grade magic stones that were treated as trash, sought out a craftsman and made the first magic stone stove. However, his master and others in the world thought it was a highly dangerous and useless endeavor.

“Those who were accustomed to burning wood couldn’t understand the need for a magic stone stove. The creator was expelled from the Mage’s Association but continued to make and sell the stoves. What has become of it now?”

“…”

“Unless it’s an area that pathologically loves tradition like the West, or where it’s difficult to obtain magic stones for stoves, most use magic stone stoves. Nobody finds it strange anymore.”

Yuder thought of the mountain cabin where he had lived before joining the Cavalry. Even that crumbling house had a magic stone stove. Of course, it was incomparably small and worn compared to the beautiful stove in Kishiar's office, but it was sufficient to keep the house warm enough to avoid freezing to death in the winter.

"I like that stove. I'm very fond of how something once deemed useless became a necessity in the world, thanks to those who believed in its value and pressed on."

"So, that's why you have a stove even in the middle of the office?"

"Exactly. Wherever I stay, whether it's my bedroom or the Peletta Castle."

Kishiar, who replied lightly, flicked the cloak that had been draped over his chair. The pins and buttons affixed to the shoulder of his garment clearly bore the emblem of the Duke of Peletta.

"And that's why I included a flame when I had to decide on an emblem to use as the Duke of Peletta."

"I never knew… you liked it that much."

Even in his previous life, whenever Yuder thought of Kishiar, an image of a burning stove always accompanied him. However, he didn't realize that even the flame used in the Duke of Peletta's emblem held such meaning. The newfound fact was both surprising and intriguing.

"On the first day of forming the Cavalry, I wished for it to be like the magic stone stove. Something that may seem useless or weak at first, but will eventually become an essential existence that's recognized. That's what I mean."

"…"

“When I heard the words of Tain’s firstborn earlier, it suddenly reminded me of that day.”

Yuder looked at Kishiar’s red eyes, seemingly captivated, as they were focused on the unlit wall stove.

“Maybe not now, but someday, the existence of the Awakeners will be recognized as naturally as mages, if not more. But that day will never be given without effort.”

And Kishiar made the first step of a foundation that could strive for that day with his own hands.

“I’ll make today’s event another big step towards that day. With you.”

“…”

“You’ll be with me, of course, won’t you?”

The heart pounded, large and incredibly fast.

Yuder Aile had never felt a positive emotion whenever he thought about the real future. But whenever Kishiar spoke about the future, he always felt as if his heart would burst.

The future he envisioned was as broad and vast as the throat can gulp, and it was beautiful.

Toward the man who dreamed of a future that Yuder Aile could not paint even if he died, he nodded with a painful and clear conviction.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Kishiar smiled joyfully. He reached out and pulled Yuder to him. Led by the unhesitant pull that overcame the appropriate distance that the Commander and assistant should maintain, he soon found himself sitting on Kishiar's lap.

The man, raising his hand clad in a black glove, silently and yet overly long pressed his lips, breathed out sweet breath, and muttered,

"…You probably don't know how much joy I get from that answer."

"…"

The sticky and headache-inducing dream completely vanished at that moment. Yuder, looking down at his hand grasped by Kishiar, impulsively but cautiously bent down and pressed his lips to the white back of the hand.

'…You probably don't know either.'

The feelings Yuder felt every time he informed him that his previous life was different and that it would change in the future. And his thoughts.

He wouldn't know. And he wished he wouldn't know in the future…

Feelings that could not be uttered melted and disappeared between his lips, and Yuder raised his eyes to meet the slightly surprised red eyes. No more conversation was needed. The moment he closed his eyes again, strength entered the tightly grasped hand, and a warm heat overlapped on his lips.

"…Commander."

"Hmm?"

After a long kiss that ended with a sigh, Yuder opened his eyes and called him softly.

“Are you still deliberately controlling the power below?”

“…”

Instead of an answer, the smile turned a bit awkward.

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“If I don’t, wouldn’t it become inconvenient for us both? Having a nightmare just by restoring power once is enough, there’s no need to do it twice.”

“That’s not because of you, Commander… Anyway, it’s not just a one-time or two-time problem.”

Yuder looked down at his legs supported under the raised knees and opened his mouth with difficulty.

“I thought this last time too, but it can’t be good for your body, can it? You go to bed much later than me and wake up early, and constantly suppressing your power is going to be too burdensome, I think.”

“…”

“Just a moment. Is it because of me that you’re not sleeping properly?”

Thinking about it, Kishiar was a person who was good at hiding his condition with an indifferent face. Suddenly, the back of his head felt a little chilly as he thought that his unusually late bedtime and early waking might be because of that reason.

“I naturally need little sleep.”

“But.”

“I’m glad you worry about me like that, but I’d like you to know that I worry about you just as much. Who’s worrying about whom, when your eyes and strength haven’t fully recovered yet?”

With one word, the man who made Yuder close his mouth kissed him lightly on the forehead, smiling. Then he kissed his eyes and his cheeks. It was a pleasant kiss, imbued not with desire but a pleasant warmth.

“…Okay. Let’s do this. Once this eye heals completely, I promise not to suppress it forcefully. As for sleep… hmm. If it bothers you that much, shall we sleep at the same time starting tonight?”

Still dissatisfied, there was no denying that his eye had not healed, so there was nothing to be said. Yuder silently nodded his head. Kishiar smiled and kissed him deeply on the eyelid.

That night, they lay side by side in the large bed, facing each other. Although they felt as if they were doing something they should not have been doing so casually, neither of them wanted to avoid it.

Lying next to each other and looking into each other’s eyes felt very strange. Kishiar was incredibly beautiful, even with her hair and face slightly pressed against the pillow.

Suddenly, Yuder recalled the story of the Empress who had asked to place her coffin facing the first Emperor’s. How might Kishiar, who had once said she understood the sentiment behind that request, be feeling now?

“What are you thinking so hard about? It’s as if you’re going to bore a hole into my face.”

“…I was thinking about something I forgot to tell you and how I should say it.”

Rather than revealing his true thoughts, he changed the subject. When Kishiar asked what it was, Yuder explained that Baron Willhem had come to relay the Duke of Tain's interest. Kishiar frowned at this news.

"Hmm… As expected, he came as soon as I left you alone. That man is really brazen."

"Yes. Everything he said was quite obvious."

"So, what did you say?"

"I told him to contact the Commander first if he wants to get in touch with me."

"You did well."

Kishiar let out a soft laugh. Seeing that laugh while lying face to face felt oddly unfamiliar.

"Are you uncomfortable with me here?"

"I am not uncomfortable."

"Really?"

"…Really."

"Alright."

Kishiar smiled and reached out to stroke Yuder's hair. The ticklish sensation made his bangs messy. Yuder left him to play with his hair as he pleased.

"Have you ever slept like this with anyone before?"

He was about to say no, but a faint memory from his distant childhood surfaced.

“I think I did when I was a child, sleeping with my grandfather.”

“Hmm. That’s right. You said you lived with your grandfather.”

Kishiar seemed to recall the family details that had been on Yuder’s application.

“You must have been quite pampered growing up.”

“I don’t know about being pampered… He was just normal. If I misbehaved, I was scolded, and we had occasional quarrels, but that’s how we lived.”

The memories of living with his grandfather were now mostly lost, buried under the many storms of his previous life. However, a twenty-year-old young man should still retain many memories of his grandfather, so he tried his best to recall and respond.

Although the answer wasn’t particularly amusing, Kishiar couldn’t seem to stop smiling with a peculiar expression.

“Why are you smiling so much?”

“Do you know? It’s the first time you’ve talked about yourself like this.”

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“…Is that so?”

“It is.”

Yuder clamped his mouth shut for a moment. Life before joining the Cavalry did not need to be buried like events from a previous life, but neither was it a topic full of intrigue that he would willingly discuss. What could there be to say about a life in a secluded cabin, where one had to hike nearly half a day down a mountain to meet a neighbor? Seeing a smile at a small memory he’d deemed neither necessary to mention nor remember, Yuder felt a sense of complexity.

The fact that he had been able to act boldly until now, despite looking suspicious, was because Kishiar’s silent consent and patience had supported him. Kishiar had shown faith so immense that it could be difficult for Yuder, the very subject, to fully comprehend. However, that didn’t mean Kishiar was not curious at all, Yuder realized anew.

‘…Well, it’s only natural.’

Yuder, watching the happy man, cautiously opened his mouth.

“I didn’t know you would be so happy about such a trivial story.”

“It’s your story, so how can it be trivial?”

Their eyes met, clearly gleaming.

“…If there’s anything more you’re curious about, please ask.”

He wouldn’t be able to answer everything, but he still wanted to say that. Kishiar brushed Yuder’s forelock entangled in his fingers and lightly shook his head.

“Mm… It’s always more joyful to receive such things as unexpected gifts. But it’s a bit regrettable that I can’t see what you were like as a child. You must have been as cute as an angel.”

“No. Even my grandfather never said that.”

Yuder responded honestly and coolly.

“Why? You’re so cute even now.”

The natural, playful question brought a retort to the tip of Yuder’s tongue. If anyone looked like a child who would be called as cute as an angel, it was certainly the man before him in his youth. Now he possessed such excessive beauty; what would have been so different back then? He must have looked like the very manifestation of a real angel.

There might be a portrait from that time now, but in his previous life, Emperor Katchian had erased all traces of the entire imperial family. If he had tried, he might have found information, but as he hadn’t, Kishiar’s childhood remained largely unknown.

“I think only you would describe me that way.”

“My aesthetic sense is just fine. I only speak as I see.”

Kishiar answered seriously and then gradually moved from Yuder’s hair to stroke his ear. Following down to the corner of the left eye, his finger playfully brushed downward, causing Yuder’s eyes to close involuntarily. As he slowly blinked a few times, a forgotten weariness washed over him, making him feel languid.

“You must be sleepy.”

“No… I’m not.”

‘I had thought to make sure Kishiar fell asleep first since I rested enough today.’

He tried to resist, but the oncoming drowsiness was unstoppable. Kishiar saw him bite his lip forcefully and chuckled softly.

“You’ve been acting like you’ve forgotten all about you not yet fully recovered during the day, so your body must be tired. I’ll sleep too, so goodnight.”

With those faint words as the last, Yuder fell into a deep sleep.

–-

The next day, Yuder woke up without dreaming at all. The sound of washing came from the nearby bathroom. He cracked open a window, and the cool breeze woke him fully.

After a deep breath, he raised a finger and pointed at a tree outside the window, sending a sharp gust of wind that shook its thick branches. The birds that had been greeting the morning were startled and took flight all at once.

‘Certainly, I had more power to release than before taking the medicine, but something felt more oppressive.’

The left eye that he saw through the mirror was still veiled like a curtain with a black spot. The meaning of that black spot was clearer than anything else. It meant that the absorbed poison was still there.

‘Why doesn’t this anomaly disappear quickly even though the magic spell was successful?’

Whenever Yuder tried to exert power, Yuder felt an oppressive sensation, as if being obstructed by something. It was because the

amount of power that could be released felt less compared to the amount of power possessed.

‘Is it because the forces of different natures inside the body are not fused?’

Enon speculated that it might be the influence of the monster’s toxicity already absorbed before Yuder received the magic spell to dispel the trace of amplification, slowing the recovery.

Until now, the power that existed in Yuder’s body was the power that Yuder originally possessed, the pure power from the Red Stone, and the power absorbed from Kishiar, all of which ultimately had similar characteristics. But this time, whether because of absorbing the trace of poison and amplification through the blood of a monster opposing Yuder’s own power, the recovery was slow.

Therefore, Enon prescribed a medicine to activate the body’s energy that wants to recover, but could this oppression really be solved by that alone?

‘Do I need to do something more? But what should I do?’

Previously, Yuder thought there was nothing to be nervous about because there would be no problems with his life even if he didn’t fully recover, but the thoughts changed slightly since yesterday.

‘Would it get better if I gouged out the top part of the eye and received some divine power?’

Yuder, who had a gruesome thought for a moment, soon shook his head. If the reason why the stain covering the eye did not disappear even after the trace of amplification was gone was because it had been absorbed too deeply and had become like a plant naturally symbiotic with the body, forcibly gouging and treating would only cause pain without solving the fundamental problem.

Yuder was lost in serious thought until Kishiar, who had bathed first, called him.

“What are you thinking about with the window open?”

“I was examining the extent of my power recovery, but…”

Kishiar had every right to know the changes in his condition and the progress of speculation in detail. Yuder hesitated for a moment and then explained all the thoughts he had been having. Upon hearing the concerns, Kishiar faintly raised the corner of his mouth, furrowing his brow as if guessing why Yuder had suddenly shown a quick will to recover.

“But it’s important that recovery is happening, so don’t be impatient. Hurrying won’t get things done.”

“…Yes.”

“Promise not to have such a terrible thought as gouging out your eye.”

“I know the probability of it having no effect is high. It was just something I said.”

Yuder said so, but Kishiar’s expression remained tight for a while.

“Then let’s have breakfast with the others today, and then go meet the firstborn.”

As soon as he left the room with Yuder, who was ready, Kishiar naturally pulled him by the waist and stuck to his side. The servants of the Willhem family, who were passing the corridor, bowed their heads as if they couldn’t see and retreated.

“Good morning, Commander!”

As they descended into the hall where the Cavalry members were gathering for a meal, those who were already there stood up all at once to greet them. They all looked much healthier, their faces rosy compared to before.

Yuder, suppressing a smile, brushed past his shaking colleagues and took a seat beside Kishiar. Shortly afterward, Ever, who appeared a little late, sat across from Yuder and greeted him.

“Commander, it feels like it’s been a while since I’ve seen you in the morning. Good morning to Yuder as well.”

“It might be good to get up early today for a change. Did you return after having a good time yesterday?”

Ever nodded with a calm smile at the question that implied, “Did you investigate well the matters related to the Star of Nagran at the Security Management Team yesterday?”

“Yes, I did. As I heard, there was much to see in the Finnard Square. It was even more fun than I thought, and I lost track of time. Ah! I also bought a gift for Kanna.”

“Oh? Just for Kanna Wand?”

“Of course, I bought shares for the Commander and Yuder as well. It’s nothing special, so it’s embarrassing, but will you accept it?”

“If it’s a gift from a competent Deputy Commander of Shin Division, I can’t refuse.”

The servants of the Willhem family, who placed food dishes in front of them and then disappeared, secretly snorted at their worthless conversation, but Yuder perceived entirely different information.

‘The location must be near Finnard Square, and it seems a group of beggars who lost their memories was captured here. Mentioning Kanna probably means something related to the information that the village in the Great Sarain Forest has moved near Tainu… So Ever’s speculation was right after all.’

“How about Commander and Yuder go to Finnard Square today? The weather is good, so it’s sure to be a fun outing. If you go, I will guide you.”

“Really? That’s a good idea. What about my assistant?”

“Of course, it’s really good.”

It was an answer with all his heart, but the reaction was miserable. Yuder frowned, watching Ever’s gesture to the servants and the rapidly bowing and shaking colleagues.

“Okay. If I have nothing to do in the afternoon, let’s go. I may not want to go out, though.”

The atmosphere relaxed a little only after Kishiar, who grinned leisurely, gave Yuder a slight wink.

‘Why do they all believe even when the other side doesn’t say anything, but I think I better not say anything at all?’

Yuder sighed and finished his meal. Kishiar took Yuder to the garden, ostensibly for a walk. Since no one wanted to walk with them, the garden was more deserted than ever.

“Do you think that my speaking hinders role-playing, Commander?”

“Why think that?”

“Every time I try to fulfill the role properly, the reaction seems rather bad.”

“Does it matter? There was no problem either way, and there won’t be in the future.”

Kishiar responded lightly as he moved on.

“You don’t need to try too hard to do well. If you’ve made up your mind, do as you like.”

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Chapter 348

It was a comfort very much in Kishiar’s style.

And in some ways, Yuder felt a confidence in those words as if he could handle whatever clumsy act Yuder might perform. A somewhat subtle feeling arose in him as well.

‘It’s more comfortable to gather my thoughts, thanks to that.’

After all, the reason he accepted this role and resolved to do his best was entirely because of Kishiar. No matter how he looked at it, the fact that Kishiar would turn the situation upside down on his own if left alone, and that things would end that way, remained unchanged. So, even if he couldn’t do well, he intended to do as much as he could.

‘As I keep doing it, anything will improve. Just as always.’

He sorted out his thoughts and was scanning the surroundings while staying by Kishiar’s side when, all of a sudden, a small ornamental tree not far from them rustled abnormally.

“Commander, be careful.”

Reacting reflexively, Yuder stepped forward to use his abilities but stopped and froze his movements a moment later when he spotted a cat peeking out from between the leaves.

‘A cat…?’

“How touching. You would even try to protect me from such a small cat. It was thrilling, but please remember that your body has not fully recovered,” Kishiar said with a slight chuckle, while the cat looked at them for a while and then slowly approached, twitching its

nose. Its chest and belly were white, but its face and back were tinged with red, and it had long, yellow fur.

“I apologize. I thought even someone like Nahan would be at Tainu, so I was a little… overly cautious.”

While he was replying, the cat drew closer to Yuder’s feet and brushed against his leg. When he looked down, it brushed against the other leg too.

“It seems to like you.”

“…I think it’s just hungry.”

The existence of the cat itself somehow felt different, perhaps because of the story he heard from Pruelle the day before. But Pruelle’s younger sibling wouldn’t wander around a place like this, and they would meet them at the estate soon anyway. Yuder shifted his step to avoid the cat that kept rubbing against him. But the cat did not go its own way; it continued to follow Yuder.

“…”

“Judging by its clean fur, it is probably a domestic cat. We should tell the estate servants to find its owner.”

As Kishiar bent down and reached out his hand, the cat retreated, appearing cautious. But when Yuder reluctantly lowered his hand, the cat approached again as if nothing had happened.

“That’s a cat with a distinct taste.”

Amid Kishiar’s laughter, Yuder ended up carrying the cat to the estate instead of Kishiar.

But upon arrival, the estate’s atmosphere was markedly different than usual. There were many servants wandering around the

building, and the vibe was somehow anxious.

“Your Highness Duke Peletta! What brings you here?”

“We were out for a walk. But… I see more people here than usual; what has happened?”

“That is…”

The servants exchanged awkward glances as if they thought Duke Peletta would be displeased by the situation. But a moment later, someone spotted Yuder, who was standing a step back, and yelled out, forgetting the situation altogether.

“Wait. The cat! That’s the cat!”

“The cat! We’ve found the cat!”

The surrounding servants all rushed toward Yuder. The cat’s fur bristled, and it hissed in discomfort, but it calmed down again as Yuder stepped back.

“What on earth is going on?”

“You’ve found the cat? Where?”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed as he asked the question, his voice filled with urgency. From behind him came a desperate cry. The one who had run up to him was a familiar stranger with red hair, the same one he had seen yesterday.

As soon as Pruelle saw the cat that Yuder was holding, he looked overjoyed and squeezed his eyes shut before taking a deep breath and bowing to Kishiar.

“I present myself to Duke Peletta… I am Pruelle van Tain.”

His hair and clothing were in complete disarray, incomparable to what he had looked like the day before. Even though he seemed flustered, he did not forget to act formally, as they were technically meeting for the first time. Kishiar smiled faintly at this.

“Ah, The first child of Tain. I heard you were coming. Is this cat yours?”

“…I regret to appear in such a state before you, but yes.”

The moment that what was assumed to be untrue was revealed as fact, Yuder felt as if the weight of the cat in their arms had suddenly become incredibly heavy. Even though Yuder knew that transformation into an animal didn’t affect behavior or habits, the cat looked so much like a regular cat that it was hard to believe it had once been human. Yuder had heard that it was more comfortable in cat form, but this was unexpected and slightly confusing. Kishiar also looked at the cat for a long time before turning his eyes back to Pruelle. A significant exchange of glances occurred between the two.

“So that’s what happened. How did you lose it?”

“My cat is very skittish and afraid of people. When a servant opened the door to bring breakfast, the cat got startled and escaped through the gap, and we couldn’t find it until now.”

“Hmm… But the cat seemed to like my company. We met while I was taking a walk, and it refused to leave me. It was quite a struggle, but it was good that I brought it to find its owner.”

Pruelle looked at Yuder, who was holding the cat, with a complex expression.

“So that’s… what happened.”

Yuder handed the cat back to Pruelle. The cat, which had not made a sound until then, let out a soft cry for the first time. Pruelle

stroked the cat with trembling hands, repeating words of gratitude several times.

“I cannot just let you go without thanking you properly for finding my cat. Would you like to come up and have some tea?”

The situation had changed slightly from what had been planned, but the answer was already decided. Kishiar replied nonchalantly that he had no other obligations, and he headed to the guest room in Pruelle’s residence with Yuder. After dismissing the servants, Pruelle put down the cat, exhaled the breath he had been holding, and looked at it affectionately.

“Oh, Nipollen.”

His once stiff and dignified appearance had vanished like a mirage.

“This is not our home; I told you to be careful. It’s fortunate that the Duke found you, but what would have happened otherwise…!”

The cat, as if acknowledging its mistake, looked away and licked its paw. Kishiar, who had been watching the scene with interest, spoke up as he sat down.

“Is that cat really your younger brother? It’s hard to believe even after seeing it.”

“Yes. It’s true. This is my younger brother, Nipollen van Tain.”

“Can he not turn back into human form here? I have some questions I’d like to ask him directly.”

“After calming down a little, I will speak. As I told you yesterday, Nipollen was born with a disease peculiar to the family lineage, so he does not communicate freely with others.”

“It doesn’t seem to be a physical problem… Is it a mental issue?”

“Yes. That’s correct.”

After saying this, Pruelle petted the cat for a long while before finally explaining more about this ‘disease peculiar to the family.’

“In the Tain family, there are very occasionally those born who, despite being physically sound and conscious, close their mouths and refuse to communicate with others, living their entire lives like this. Since most of their time is spent submerged within themselves, they either ignore unfamiliar external stimuli or become fearful of it.”

Pruelle guessed that this condition was a symptom manifested in those who were born with a strong tendency of the universal trait in the Tain family to obsess over one thing. With that thought, he considered that the difference might only be whether the trait was stronger or weaker, and that if so, all the people of the Tain family might not be very different from Nipollen.

In Nipollen’s case, the symptoms were not very severe, so he occasionally communicated with others and even directly revealed his intentions, but only his siblings recognized it.

“If you meet him in person, you will see that he is a lovely child with no problem living together even though he has the disease, but his parents never visited him.”

Pruelle said it was far better for someone to be interested in themselves than only interested in gambling. One could see where Pruelle’s words, ‘You don’t know unless you see it,’ came from.

Pruelle brought a small bowl of water for the cat. While the cat was drinking water and licking its fur to calm itself, the three began the conversation they originally needed to have.

“Last night, after returning as I was, I met with Baron Willhem. Based on what I know about the family, I questioned him, and he easily provided information about the secret trade. Fortunately, he firmly believes that I will be the next duke.”

Baron Willhem was someone who faithfully followed the Tain family, but it was not from true loyalty. He was mindful that he could lose his place as lord of Tainu without the mercy of the Tain family. Therefore, he naturally showed weakness in the words of the first child, Pruelle, who had a high probability of becoming the next duke of the Tain family.

“According to the Baron, the three knights who died in the Great Sarain Forest were apparently tasked with eliminating information related to my father’s new investment business at the base there. I thought this investment business was the ‘secret trade’ that you mentioned, and proceeded accordingly. Then…”

Pruelle’s guess was not wrong. The new investment business that Duke Tain had been conducting for over a year, keeping it a secret even from most family members, was made up of vile and nauseating plans.

“My father seems to have invested a lot of money in bringing in things that were originally not importable, joining hands with powerful figures in a country to the west. According to the Count, there was talk of hardship in opening a new base about a year ago to bring these things in more covertly.”

“What kinds of things were being brought in? Did he mention?”

“It seemed to be more than one or two things, but the most troublesome part… was people,” he had said.

A dark shadow flickered over Pruelle’s dark red eyes.

“I couldn’t hear more details due to time constraints, but among the Baron’s acquaintances, there are those I have known personally since childhood, and I have made contact with them. I should be able to tell you more by tomorrow.”

Kishiar slowly nodded his head. There was nothing entirely new in the information that Pruelle had provided, but that very fact made it all the more trustworthy.

‘He passed the test.’

“Thank you. It mustn’t have been easy to find out that much in such a short time, risking suspicion. You’ve worked hard.”

“Not at all.”

As Kishiar praised him with a smiling face, Pruelle quietly bowed his head.

“The fact that Your Majesty mentioned the secret trade that even I was unaware of means that you already knew this much. Therefore, I cannot accept that I have worked particularly hard for this.”

“Aren’t you upset?”

“Why would I be? Rather, I am very pleased, as it confirms that my choice was correct.”

Pruelle smiled silently and then rose from his seat. He approached the cat that had been sitting quietly, crouched down, and whispered softly.

“Now, you can return now, can’t you? Nipollen.”

At that, the cat’s body puffed up while still sitting, swelling and growing larger. Moments later, a small and frail-looking child revealed himself in its place.

In contrast to Pruelle, who had ordinary features, Nipollen had an unblemished white complexion and an appearance that made it difficult to easily guess the gender. If it were not for their similar hair color and eye color, it would have been hard to believe they were blood-related.

“How old are you, child?”

“I turned 13 years old just after my recent birthday.”

Being 13, Nipollen was older than Jimmy, the youngest member of the Cavalry. However, looking at the physique alone, it did not seem that way at all.

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Chapter 349

Pruelle had told Kishiar that if there was anything he wanted to ask, he should pass it through him.

“Very well. There’s one thing I want to ask first. I was curious why you approached my assistant in the garden and not anyone else. You seemed particularly interested, and I’d like to know why.”

“Understood. Nipollen. Can you tell me why you approached that person earlier? What was the reason?”

Pruelle asked gently, and the child who had been silently staring at the ground, perhaps unaware that the conversation was about him, finally lifted his head slightly. His transparent dark pupils glanced at Yuder and then turned back to his brother.

“…Same, feeling, I had.”

“Same feeling?”

“Brother, me.”

Nipollen’s voice was so soft and slow that it was hard to grasp if one didn’t pay attention. But with a few words almost like a whisper, Pruelle seemed to understand perfectly, and his eyes widened a bit.

“Do you understand what he means?”

“Uh, it seems that the reason he approached Sir Aile might be because he felt something similar in him, something like what Nipollen and I have.”

“You never mentioned that your brother has the ability to sense the energy of the Awakeners, did you?”

“Until now, I thought Nipollen only felt relieved around me because I had similar abilities. But it seems that it might not have been the only reason.”

Pruelle couldn’t hide his confusion, but his words didn’t seem to be a lie.

“Then, will you also ask him why he avoided me when I reached out to him? He looked scared and avoided me.”

Pruelle relayed the question to his brother once again.

“Nipollen, didn’t you feel the same sensation from that person as you do from me or yourself?”

Nipollen’s answer came even slower than before. The child, who had clamped his small lips shut and lowered his head, hesitated for a moment before nodding.

“What does that mean?”

“It seems that he couldn’t be entirely sure whether he felt it or not.”

Yuder’s question was met with a troubled look from Pruelle.

“Even if he can sense the energy of the Awakeners, he might not be able to distinguish it completely.”

‘…No, maybe it’s an ability that goes beyond just distinguishing.’

Yuder swallowed a response he couldn’t give to Pruelle, looking at Nipollen. Pruelle and Nipollen may not know, but Kishiar was someone who concealed powers far more potent than the Awakener’s energy. Yuder hadn’t even realized these abilities until Kishiar himself confessed and demonstrated them. If Nipollen had sensed these from the start, then it was entirely understandable that

he was wary of Kishiar, feeling that Kishiar was different from those who only had the power of the Awakener.

Glancing at Kishiar, he too seemed to be harboring similar thoughts, the interest in his eyes becoming sharper.

‘It seems that Nipollen has awakened not only the ability to transform but also another ability closer to sensing power.’

Yuder also had an excellent sense for detecting when fellow Awakeners were using their abilities. However, that had been honed through long experiences and memories of meeting many Awakeners. It had to be different from someone born with this ability to sense.

‘To meet such an extremely rare ability here. Along with Pruelle, there was another immense talent hidden.’

It would be confusing and frightening now, as he might not even know what abilities he possessed, but it was fortunate that he seemed somewhat less guarded against other Awakeners with the same abilities.

‘It shouldn’t be a problem to take refugee in the Cavalry. If it goes according to my thinking, it might even be helpful.’

“…Fine. My curiosity has been satisfied. Tell him thanks for answering.”

“Thank you.”

“When should I start protecting your sibling in the Cavalry?”

“I’ve already achieved the purpose of my visit, so after understanding all the information I can obtain from this place, I plan to return to the capital to discuss this matter with my siblings. At that time, I’ll leave Nipollen behind, so please take care of him.”

“Good. While you’re here, let’s see each other often and move together. I’ll contact you again.”

Before they left the room, Nipollen had transformed into a cat again. Leaving the well-behaved cat seated on the cushion, Kishiar dismissed the glittering-eyed servants and left the mansion, announcing that he would continue his walk.

“Nipollen van Tain; more interesting than expected.”

“Yes. It seems like it’s not just transformation abilities.”

“I think so too.”

At Yuder’s answer, the man smiled, closing and then opening his eyes.

“Now that I have a beautiful cat to look after, I need to choose someone responsible for it. I’ll have to think about who would be suitable.”

After finishing the conversation disguised as a stroll, they returned to the annex and met Nathan Zuckerman, who was waiting for a report. He had been away on a nominal errand to buy something for Kishiar but had been chasing after Baron Willhem’s knights.

“Here are the specially made fruit cookies from the famous bakery in Tainu you requested.”

“Good. I’m pleased to finally have them. Well done, Nathan.”

The man, now devoid of his previous gloomy expression since he had worked hard, casually handed over a few paper bags to Kishiar and immediately began his report.

“While tracking the movement of the knights and guards who had increased patrols in Tainu, I’ve identified a few places where a significantly large number of people were gathered.”

“Where is that?”

“The warehouses near the Red Deer Consortium, located in the outskirts where the city gate is, and the streets dense with pubs that commoners frequent.”

“Taverns and warehouses. They sound like places good for hiding something. Is that all?”

“The Peletta Knights are taking turns tailing them, but other than a change in the overall movement, it hasn’t been easy to catch them. The warehouses are heavily watched, while the taverns are overrun with decoys.”

“Report immediately if you find out anything more.”

After Nathan Zuckerman withdrew, Kishiar called Ever, who had been waiting for them.

“I finished my walk but the day is far from over. I thought about getting a guide to the Finard Square you mentioned. What do you think?”

“I’ve been waiting for this. I will properly guide you today.”

Ever’s eyes sparkled, and he grinned.

This time, Ever, Finn, and Emun joined the carriage ride, which Nathan Zuckerman had previously taken. Ever complained lightly, mentioning that she had gone to the square with them yesterday.

“The security management team is next to Finnard Square. When the three of us went, they absolutely refused to believe that we were

members of the Cavalry. If it wasn't for the note the Commander wrote, they wouldn't have let us in."

Kishiar thought to himself, 'That must have been the case.'

On the surface, they appeared to be just a woman, a child, and a scrawny, ordinary young man, which must have looked quite amusing. However, their true nature couldn't be discerned by their appearance alone. Ever and Finn Eldore were beings capable of unleashing destructive abilities several times greater than other members even when alone. Emun had the stealthy and observant ability to hide in darkness and see much more than others.

"The one in charge of that place is the Commander of Tainu Knights, a middle-aged man named Jeymer Phil, who has no enthusiasm at all," they said. "I mentioned that I wanted to gather opinions related to this investigation on behalf of the Commander, but he seemed very bothered by it. However, it was convenient to look around the prison since he didn't follow us."

"So, did he express his opinions?"

"According to the orders of Baron Willhem, he did strengthen the security of Tainu, but from his personal thoughts… He seemed to believe that the Commander was surely mistaken," they said.

Ever muttered this with a scowled face. Yuder made a mental note to remember the name of the knight Jeymer Phil, whom he hadn't met yet.

"Even after losing three of their comrades, they show that kind of attitude? Seems like there's little camaraderie among them."

"It seems that many members of the Tainu Knights were not originally from there. Many moved from other knight orders for different reasons. They consider themselves no different from

mercenaries, and I overheard them having self-deprecating conversations."

This time, the one who answered was not Ever, but Emun.

"Really? Truly, they are knights fitting of a duke's household that must save money. How was the prison?"

"The prison was much larger than we thought. It is a place that incarcerates and punishes criminals not only from Tainu but also from the surrounding villages, so there were many people coming and going."

Ever said that the scale of the prison was enormous, ranging from the basement's first floor to the third floor, and there were many visitors for meetings. It did not seem as secluded as they had thought.

"As we passed by, we noticed some people in a corner of the basement's first floor. When we asked a guard, he said they were beggars who had recently been brought in from another village after losing their memories. But…"

A smile rose in Ever's eyes, one that she couldn't hide.

"Emun and Finn recognized a few faces among them."

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Chapter 350

The reason Ever had taken the two of them along was that they had been the ones who had visited the Awakeners's village in the Great Sarain Forest as part of the first dispatched team. Although those who had lost their memory could not recognize the people and wasn't sure if they were the ones chased out of the village, she thought that Emun and Finn might be able to. And fortunately, her expectation had turned out wonderfully correct.

"Was it certain that the ones you saw in the village within the Great Sarain Forest were there?"

At Kishiar's question, Emun and Finn nodded simultaneously.

"It was when you, Commander, were conversing with the Awakeners of that village. After everything was done, the Nelarn Knights were busy preparing to leave, so there wasn't much time, right?"

"That's true."

"Do you remember that at their request, Finn, Gakane, and I went back into the village once more?"

"Didn't I want to check if there were any traces left by the captured criminal?"

"Yes. You had requested our help to finish the job without agitating the Awakeners living in the village."

This was a story that Yuder, who only knew the part that Kanna had summarized, had heard for the first time.

Even after capturing Jenn, the servant who had betrayed Prince Ejain and was hiding in the Awakeners's village, the Nelarn Knights wanted to carefully check where he had stayed. It was just for one night, but they wanted to be sure. Emun, Finn, and Gakane were the ones who went back inside the village to assist with this while Kishiar was conversing with Prince Ejain.

"The task was completed quickly as there were no specific matters, and the place we visited was a zone where ordinary people stayed."

"They were terribly uneasy when they saw us. We even briefly saw them fighting with each other."

Finn added with a scowling face. He had been in that state ever since he had left behind a hint in the Great Sarain Forest.

"Yes. Well, we couldn't remember all those people, but since it was such a peculiar encounter, it seems some of them still remained in our minds. I remembered them as we passed by the prison yesterday."

"If that's the case, it must be certain."

Kishiar's eyes sharpened.

"What did you tell the Knights of Tainu?"

"We said nothing. We thought it suspicious if they knew we were interested in the prisoners, so we planned to act after reporting to you, Commander."

"Good. Let's go and see for ourselves."

The carriage arrived at Finnard Square shortly after. Next to it was the security management team building, proudly welcoming countless visitors with its doors wide open, preserving its old style.

The soldiers guarding the doors were shocked at the arrival of the carriage bearing Duke Peletta, and doubted their eyes. The same was true for Jeymer Phil, the late-arriving head of the Tainu Knights.

“I greet His Grace, Duke Peletta.”

His appearance was a mess, not befitting a knight. Without even a sword at his waist, and with his belt hanging loosely, it was clear he must have run out from a nap. Yuder, looking at the red face of the middle-aged man with a broad peeled forehead, thought Ever’s assessment was indeed accurate. The fact that someone who didn’t even do his duty dared to look down on others was merely laughable.

“I apologize, but may I ask what brings you here…?”

“I heard that my capable deputy Ever Beck and my members, whom I sent here yesterday, saw some suspicious individuals in the underground prison. Considering the urgency of the matter, I came to see for myself.”

“Eh?”

The Knight Commander’s gaze darted busily between Kishiar and the members standing behind him. The soldiers were no different, sending bewildered looks their way.

“Suspicious… people, you say? There was no mention of this yesterday… I don’t quite understand what you mean.”

“It’s a bit uncomfortable to speak in detail here.”

“But Your Highness, this is Tainu. If you come like this without any prior notice…”

Was there any need to tolerate the man who, unable to hide his astonishment, stammered three times at Kishiar's words?

The moment Yuder raised his hand, the ground under Jeymer Phil and the soldiers surrounding them shook violently. Though the level of force was trivial compared to what they could normally exert, it was enough to make those who had been off guard scream and stumble backward.

"An, an earthquake?"

"Ah. I saw a pesky insect fluttering about, and I feared it might harm the Commander, so I used a bit of my power. I apologize for the inconvenience. It was my mistake."

Jeymer Phil blinked several times in anger at Yuder's completely insincere muttering and abruptly stood up.

"What is this? How dare you…!"

"Yuder, did I not tell you that it's not good to use your power like this when you're still not fully healed?"

But it was Kishiar who scolded in a stern voice before Tainu's Knight Commander could speak. Jeymer Phil had to reluctantly close his mouth.

"How can your body heal if you waste your strength on mere insects? Why won't you listen? It really hurts and worries me."

"…I'm sorry. But as someone closest to the Commander, I thought I must naturally do that."

The man who had been giving Jeymer Phil an infinitely unlucky glare bowed his head immediately in front of Kishiar. It was as if watching a wild beast suddenly turn meek before its master. Kishiar briefly widened his eyes, then chuckled softly. He gently caressed

the black-haired man's cheek and whispered tenderly in a way that no one could misunderstand.

"I didn't expect you to use that as a shield here. But… you can't say such cute things and expect it to be okay."

"Yes."

"Be careful. Apologize to those who fell, too."

"Yes, I understand. I'm sorry."

Jeymer Phil finally accepted Yuder's apology. Though the voice remained insincere, he had no time to dwell on that.

'Surely not, that man is the one from the rumors…?'

Even the unenthusiastic Knight Commander of Tainu had heard some rumors about the Duke of Peletta and the male member who accompanied him. But he never imagined he'd see it with his own eyes. He swallowed in astonishment, recalling the whispers that had secretly circulated from Baron Willhem's mansion.

"Commander Phil, I apologize for the inconvenience. As you can see, my assistant worries about me too much and sometimes causes scenes like this. Earlier, he even mistook a palm-sized cat for an assassin and tried to fight it. Isn't it adorable?"

"…Yes?"

"So don't be too angry, and watch the road more carefully next time."

While the words seemed conciliatory, upon closer examination, each expression was anything but insulting. But the clarity of the smile and voice that delivered them was so spotless that in the end,

Jeymer Phil could only lick his lips without uttering a word and turn his head away.

“The underground dungeon is that way. I will guide you, so please follow me.”

Duke Pelleta and his soldiers, heading for the underground dungeon, received an entirely different gaze as they moved than when they had just arrived. Those who had seen an Awakener, especially a Cavalry, utilizing their abilities for the first time, felt an unavoidable, subtle fear even if they said nothing outwardly.

It was better to be shunned than to be ridiculed. Yuder thought so, proudly straightening his shoulders and looking around. All the people around him flinched and retreated when their eyes met, but only the fellow Cavalry members managed to suppress their laughter, their faces expressing relief.

The underground dungeon’s first floor was not as dark as expected. Since the ground outside was partially dug out to create windows, there was some light. The appearance of the unusual visitors with the Knight Commander caught the attention of the guards and the jailers. Amid the surrounding tension, Jeymer Phil opened his mouth with a stern face.

“Who are these suspicious people, and why have they come? Can you now tell me if this matter is related to the recent incident?”

“No, it has nothing to do with that. We have only heard that there may be people imprisoned here who seem to have been harmed by an Awakener’s abilities.”

“What?”

Jeymer Phil’s brows furrowed in confusion.

“Are you saying there is an Awakener here?”

“No, they’re most likely ordinary people. They just seem to have been harmed by an ability. Phil, how much do you know about the abilities of an Awakener?”

Suddenly changing the subject, Jeymer Phil concealed his displeasure and shook his head.

“Of course, I don’t… know much.”

“To others, it might not seem significant, but all my soldiers who visited here yesterday are Awakeners. And the Cavalry has the priority to investigate matters related to Awakeners. There’s no more time to explain, so I want to find them first.”

In short, it meant that explaining in detail was meaningless unless they were an Awakener. Jeymer Phil let out a shocked breath and called one of the jailers to give instructions for the guidance.

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“Understood. If that’s the case, I will follow behind. Do as you wish.”

The half-hearted response by the Knight Commander, who seemed to have lost his motivation, was immediately followed by Kishiar, who then gestured to Ever, Emun, and Finn. Together with the jailer, they hastened to the place where they had discovered the imprisoned the day before.

“It’s there!”

Yuder turned his head toward the direction Emun was pointing and yelling at. The place was a large-scale dungeon attached next to the door leading from the 1st to the 2nd floor of the underground prison. While the other cells they passed were relatively quiet, strange noises repeatedly emanated from this area, attracting attention.

The sounds of scraping against the wall, inhuman screams, and laughter that seemed like sobbing reached them. Jeymer Phil asked the jailer with a grimaced face.

“It’s chilling. What sort of creatures are imprisoned here to make such a noise?”

He seemed as though he did not even know that such beings were locked away in the prison he was in charge of.

“That would be…”

As the jailer cautiously began to explain the nature of those trapped inside, the Cavalry members approached without hesitation. The guard in front of the door swallowed nervously.

Yuder stood beside Kishiar and examined those inside the bars. According to what he had heard from Ever, they were a diverse group in terms of age and gender. Their bodies were so filthy that it was difficult to recognize the original form of their clothes, and a foul smell wafted out even from a distance.

Most lay sprawled on the cold stone floor, shaking as they stared into the void. Some howled like wild beasts, while others repeatedly scratched at the walls. The scene was so unusual it was hard to believe that the prisoners were fellow humans, and Kishiar's expression turned grave.

"Were they in this state when they first arrived here?"

"Yes. They hardly communicate and show no interest in one another."

The jailer answered with a tense face. According to him, the prisoners didn't show interest in each other, and managing them was difficult due to sudden fits and self-harm.

"Originally, there were about 20 of them captured, but with frequent fits and self-harm, there are about 16 left now."

"Has there been any family or relatives looking for them?"

"Yes. Their clothes are so dirty it's hard to confirm, but among what they're wearing, many aren't in the style of the Empire. I suspect some foreigners might be mixed in, but there's no way to know where they came from…"

Yuder listened to the conversation and once again scanned the faces of the imprisoned individuals.

'They certainly don't seem to be Awakeners. It's not merely that their memories are erased; their minds seem shattered… Is this the work of our side?'

If they were indeed ordinary people from the village of the Star of Nagran, there was every possibility that they had been driven out by Nahan, who favored only the Awakeners.

‘If they weren’t abandoned when the village was moved but treated like this afterward, it’s possible that a significant internal dispute occurred later.’

“Emun. Who among them did you and Finn recognize?”

“Uh. So, well…”

Emun, who was frowning as he looked inside the prison, pointed out several people. Among them were individuals with notable appearances, like a man covered in large scars and a woman with striking ash-colored long hair.

“Those people. Honestly, I wish I were wrong… but looking again, it seems I’m right.”

Having finished pointing them out, Emun sighed softly, saying his mood felt strange.

“To reduce them to this state to prevent them from leaking information, even if it didn’t kill them, how is it different from death? I can’t understand why it had to be done this way…”

Yuder wore a perplexed expression, silently observing the faces of his comrades.

“Open the door. I’ll take them.”

“Sir?”

At that moment, Kishiar, having finished his conversation with the jailer, gave the command. The soldiers around all opened their

mouths in disbelief, only to clamp them shut again upon seeing Yuder's face.

"Surely they didn't commit any crimes to be locked up here? From now on, we'll take charge of the investigation."

"Yes, just do as he says. What more will we know by taking care of these lunatics ourselves?"

With an annoyed voice, the Knight Commander gestured, and without a word, the prison door was opened.

"Take them to the Baron Willhem's estate."

With their noses wrinkled at the stinging smell, the jailers tied the prisoners and led them out in a line.

"Thank you for cooperating even though you must have been taken aback by this sudden request, Commander Jeymer. I won't forget your cooperation."

"If I could be of any help in such a trivial matter, I'm glad."

Gently smiling at Jeymer Phil, who had answered in a roundabout way, Kishiar seemed to brighten the gloomy prison. Even the chattering Jeymer Phil momentarily lost his wits at that radiant smile.

"A trivial matter? If the Cavalry raises their merits because of this incident, it will be to your credit too, right?"

"…"

"Well, actually, the possibility that investigating as you say won't amount to much is high, but if it turns out otherwise, it can help Tainu. The Cavalry gains experience, Baron Willhem and you will have less trouble, so it's a good path for everyone."

“That…”

Jeymer Phil, who was about to mutter something, ended up admitting that he had nothing to say.

“This matter, keep it confidential externally, and if you find those people again or if someone related comes looking, contact us.”

Kishiar turned away neatly, leaving Jeymer Phil behind. Yuder followed him, glancing back briefly. The expressions of Jeymer Phil and the soldiers, looking like they had chewed on bugs, were quite interesting.

Back at the estate, Kishiar ordered the prisoners to be washed and given empty rooms. While Baron Willhem’s servants followed the order with faces like they might faint, Yuder sat in Kishiar’s residence with Ever, sipping tea and cookies brought by the errand boy. Of course, that was just a pretense, and the actual conversation was a meeting related to the events of the day.

“As you already know, according to Kanna Wand’s report, the location where the villagers from the Great Sarain Forest have moved to is likely near Tainu. However, around here, there are no mountains or forests where a large number of people could hide.”

“Did they indeed confiscate an entire village?”

At Ever’s question, Kishiar answered softly while sipping his tea.

“If they had the ability to build a village in the Great Sarain Forest and hide it, it might be possible, but unlike the forest, this area is closely linked to nearby towns and cities. That would be too risky.”

“Then…”

“According to Kanna’s read information, they have been interested in the trade situation of Tainu through the Great Sarain

Forest for a long time. Considering the resentment one of them showed towards Tainu recently, they may have moved in a direction to help that objective this time.”

“In that case, there’s also the probability of hiding disguised as a mercenary group or merchant group.”

Kishiar tilted his head at Yuder’s words, who had been listening silently.

Certainly, the likelihood was higher. In Tainu and its surroundings, there were many commercial groups and mercenary bands engaged in trade with the Empire in the Great Sarain Forest. If they had to move quickly, taking over or looting such places would have been easier.

Commercial groups and mercenary bands were diverse groups with many passersby, varying in age and gender. If a sudden large number of people had to stay or disappear, no one would have found it strange.

“So I’d like to entrust the investigation to those who have worked in the relevant occupations in the Cavalry,” he said. “As for who would be suitable, Ever, you’ll take care of selecting them and then report back.”

“Understood. I can think of a few suitable candidates.”

Ever seemed to be recalling the faces of the members, mumbling to herself.

“The ones we brought in today should be kept in a state where they can converse for a while. Look for ways to make that possible. It’ll be easier once Kanna Wand returns, but there’s still something we should try before then.”

Treating those affected by mental abilities from the outside was extremely difficult. If there were the will to improve oneself, it would be easier, but if that were so simple, then not so many would have died already in prison.

However, it was a problem that couldn't be ignored without trying, so Yuder agreed with what Kishiar had said.

"Oh, and both of you should be aware of one more thing."

As the tea the three had been drinking nearly revealed the bottom of the cups, Kishiar opened his mouth.

"I heard that regular auctions are held in Tainu when I was at the Western nobles' salon. Officially, they are unrelated to Tain's family, but since commercial groups receiving investment from Tain's family participate in large numbers, they can't be entirely unrelated."

Yuder realized that this was something Kishiar had intended to say after visiting the salon.

"Last year, quite astonishing items appeared there, causing quite a stir, but if it's going to be held again, don't you think we must participate?"

"Since the goods will be moving in large quantities, it'll be easier to catch the tail and find evidence."

"That's true."

"But… will it be held?"

At a time when they were trying to catch the Star of Nagran and protect secret trade from Tain's family, could such an event really be held again? As if reading Yuder's thoughts, Kishiar spoke softly.

"We'll have to make it happen."

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“Do you have any plans in mind?”

“No plans.”

Kishiar’s response was succinct. However, his eyes were shining like a predator waiting for the right time to strike.

“But if my guess is correct, thanks to the people we brought today, we might soon get what we want.”

The auction will be held again because of the people brought today? Yuder’s eyes narrowed at the very significant statement, and he became lost in thought. Ever also wore an expression that seemed to say she almost understood.

“Commander. It seems time for the other members who were outside to return, so I will take my leave. Thank you for the opportunity to enjoy delicious tea and cookies.”

“What nonsense. This is but a trifle for saving many with your sharp observation. I appreciate the proper guidance today.”

After Ever left, Yuder looked down at the almost empty cookie plate and swallowed the last remaining tea. Kishiar seemed to be waiting and lightly tapped the handle of the teapot.

“Would you like another cup? There’s still some left.”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“How were the cookies Nathan brought? According to Baron Willhem, they are a popular product that every noble family in Tainu sends someone to buy.”

The thought of Nathan Zuckerman mingling among the servants lined up to buy cookies, beautifully garnished with dried fruits and decorated with colored sugar powder, was not something he wanted to imagine. Even if it was for the sake of pretending to be decadent, having a swordmaster like him run such an errand was something only Kishiar would command in this world.

“They were fine.”

“Perhaps it’s because of the fruit, but the first taste was too tangy for my mouth. Next time I’ll have to order them to change it to chocolate.”

“You plan to order more?”

“Shouldn’t I have a good reason if I’m going to send my adjutant out often? Stores where you have to stand in line for a long time are quite suitable for that purpose.”

He couldn’t say anything more to that. Yuder put the last remaining cookie in his mouth. While it was certainly tasty, his mind was filled only with the last words Kishiar had said before Ever left.

If the auction was to be held today because of the people who had lost their memories, how could that possibly happen? Numerous possibilities filled his head and repeated their busy movement.

“What are you thinking so hard about?”

“I was pondering how your earlier words could come to fruition.”

“Was that so intriguing to you?”

Kishiar smiled as if there was no helping it, propped his chin, and answered.

“Simple. It’s because of the unrest I will cause.”

Only then did Yuder finally understand his meaning.

The existence of those who had lost their memories meant an internal division among the Awakeners in the village of the Star of Nagran. If there were people like Nahan and his comrades who would stop at nothing to avenge others, then conversely, there would have been those who harbored great resentment because of this matter.

Internal opposition and conflict were the best factors to cause members to lose their prudence. Tainu's noble families and Baron Willhem were more likely to experience confusion much quicker and more powerfully than Kishiar had initially expected.

Then, the paths to choose would also narrow, and after that, things would unfold faster than they had anticipated before coming to Tainu.

"…I see. Understood."

"You're quick to understand, which is great. Would you like to eat more cookies as a reward?"

"…"

Yuder shook his head. But Kishiar, with a tender smile that said not to refuse, opened the second box of cookies.

"Hm?"

But he immediately paused without moving the snacks and looked inside the lid. There, a small folded note was secretly attached.

"Nathan left one more thing for us to see."

"What does it say?"

“It says that the ones we were going to meet here will arrive in Tainu soon. It worked out well.”

Kishiar quickly read the note and turned his gaze back to Yuder.

“Remember what I told you? That we would meet some monster experts in Tainu?”

“Yes.”

“They are the ones coming from Peletta. Once they arrive, it would be good to call pharmacist Enon and see them all together.”

They were monster experts from Peletta. Even reflecting on his previous life’s memories, their identity was not easily guessed. Yuder felt a faint tension and nodded.

“I will pass on the message.”

The next morning in Tainu began with a different feeling. Sensing a faint tremor like an earthquake, Yuder, who had opened his eyes alertly, looked around and saw Kishiar, who was already awake.

“Did you feel it, Commander?”

“It’s not near here. Seems like an explosion occurred quite far away.”

Rising from his seat, Kishiar opened the window and looked out. In no time, he returned with three small messenger birds in his hand.

“The report is quick… let’s see where.”

While Kishiar read the notes from a small pouch hanging from his leg, Yuder gave water to the birds that cocked their heads.

“There has been a mysterious intrusion at the Tainu Security Management Team building and the Red Deer Consortium building

we visited. The culprits haven’t been caught, but they are being pursued now, and it seems a few guards and prisoners were injured.”

The other reports were nearly identical. They were all sent by the Peletta Knights, who pretended to frolic and observed the situation outside Tainu.

“It must be the Star of Nagran.”

“Yes. But we can’t know if those who invaded both places had the same intention.”

Yuder guessed that at least those who invaded the Tainu Security Management Team were undoubtedly looking for the ones who had lost their memories. Whether they meant to kill and silence them or find and rescue them belatedly was unclear, but sadly, they were a step too late. The memory-lost ones were already here.

“Things started earlier than expected, but Baron Willhem won’t contact us right away. Shall we feign ignorance and take our time here today? We can call the firstborn in the evening.”

Kishiar smiled, folding the letter neatly. Moments later, only a small amount of ash remained in his palm.

Yuder rested all day with Kishiar. Kishiar, not caring at all about the noisy movements happening in the main building, played card games or chatted with other members in the reception room. Despite any sinister looks from Baron Willhem’s servants, he remained by his male lover’s side, laughing cheerfully; he was the very picture of a libertine duke.

When evening came, Pruelle, cradling a cat and a book in his arms, came to dine with them. With polite manners, he thanked them for inviting both himself and the cat to dinner, then took care of his younger sibling’s meal first. Watching the cat open its tiny mouth to

eat before picking up his spoon, he looked more like a parent than a sibling.

“Your Majesty. You must have heard about the explosion incident today.”

“Of course.”

“It seems that Baron Willhem was in contact with the capital all day about the matter. My father seemed extremely angry that he still couldn’t catch the people who killed the knights in the Great Sarain Forest, on top of Tainu being violated.”

“The fact that you’re here means it’s no longer a concern.”

“Yes. Thanks to the confusion, it was easy for me to get in touch with those I know.”

The people Pruelle knew in Tainu were those who had worked under Baron Willhem for a long time, along with some nobles. During Pruelle’s brief stay in Tainu as a child, these individuals had helped him and his siblings with compassion. They readily shared information without suspicion, at the request of a prince who wanted to know about the local situation.

“My father, through Baron Willhem, appears to have secretly hidden smuggled goods at a midpoint in Tainu and then redistributed them to the capital and the southern regions. In the south, he mainly sent ‘horses brought from the west.’ Though they called them horses, what they actually were… you can probably guess.”

“People, I suppose.”

“Yes.”

Pruelle, who had answered succinctly, looked down at the meat he had been slicing and stopped moving. For a fleeting moment, a

complex emotion passed over his expressionless face.

“According to the information… there are ‘horses’ that have not yet been ‘distributed’ at that ‘midpoint’ in Tainu. There probably aren’t many places to hide living horses. So, I’ve marked a few places that are likely to be used as bases, according to my guess.”

Pruelle handed over a book he had brought to Kishiar. It was a thick history book.

“This book is famous for detailing the history of the western area and Tainu. It was written by one of the ancestors of the House of Tain. The places are marked inside.”

“Such a precious gift, thank you.”

“It’s nothing. But… I heard that unfamiliar guests arrived at the outbuilding yesterday. May I ask what happened?”

The rumor about the people they had brought from the security management team yesterday had quickly reached the main house.

“They’re related to those who killed the knights in Great Sarain Forest. We suspect that their minds were shattered by some ability and then abandoned.”

“…Such an ability exists?”

Surprise flicked across Pruelle’s face.

“Then today’s intruders at the security management team were because of…”

“It could be an extension of that. Fortunately, we were one step ahead yesterday.”

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“Did Your Highness perhaps know not only about Tain but also about them already?”

Kishiar responded only with an inscrutable smile, instead of a direct answer. In Pruelle’s eyes, tension, admiration, and trust simultaneously flashed by.

“I see. I think it would not be helpful if I knew too much, so I will not ask further. If you have any tasks for me, please tell me at any time.”

The intelligence of Duke Peletta was indeed remarkable. Who would have imagined that Duke Peletta, ridiculed by the nobles as merely a pretty face, was concealing his true character?

Hiding oneself briefly in front of strangers is easy. But to maintain it for years among those who have been observing one for a long time was nearly impossible. After acquiring the ability to shape-shift, Pruelle, who had been practicing not to be suspected in the guise of others, knew how complicated and difficult it was.

And Duke Peletta had accomplished this, and was still doing so. The fact that more people were cautious of the Emperor in the background rather than Duke Peletta, who had come to the forefront even after the Apeto incident, was evidence of this.

Could there be a weapon as dangerous and robust as a sword that doesn’t appear threatening?

Indeed, his eye for selection has never been wrong. Pruelle felt simultaneous deep relief and rare excitement, patting his younger sibling’s small head, who was eating with a pitter-patter noise.

“Those are wise words, but understand one thing. There are many who deeply regret the deeds committed by Duke Tain, for reasons other than yours. Blind rage does not discriminate, so it might become dangerous if the fact that you are here and your identity becomes known. It’s good to gather information, but try to stay away from the house of Baron Willhem as much as possible.”

Nahan himself wouldn’t attack another Awakener unless provoked, but his colleagues and the opposition might not do the same.

“I understand.”

Pruelle’s expression had become even more resolute.

“I will have to warn Nipollen to be more careful as well.”

“Things will continue like this for a while, but until Baron Willhem himself comes looking, I intend to be a person who knows nothing. Therefore, I entrust you with understanding the situation of the main building and the Tain household.”

“Leave it to me.”

While the two were conversing, the cat that had finished its meal first jumped down from the chair. Shortly after, Yuder saw a round tuft of reddish-brown fur lying under his ankle. Nipollen seemed to have liked the quietness by his side all along.

“Nipollen. It’s time to go.”

As Pruelle stood up from his seat and called his sibling, the cat opened its eyes.

“I will contact you as soon as there are any changes. Please take your time to look at the book I gave you later.”

After Pruelle left, Kishiar opened the book he had gifted him. Inside the book, exactly 4 pages were folded at the corners.

“A building of the security management team that is famous for a huge dungeon leading to the third underground floor, but there are rumors of a hidden dungeon beneath it. Kured Street, which once had a dense population of nobles but gradually became a commercial center and the common people’s area. The ancient northern wall ruins left as a space to escape from monster attacks. The famous early Tain Duke’s residence, now almost unused but preserved for its historical value. Is this how it is?”

“I never knew there was a hidden area in the security management team’s dungeon. The rest seem worth checking out as well.”

“Perhaps that’s what we must do. However, it’s this place called Kured Street that I’m talking about.”

Kishiar muttered as he looked down at the folded page of the book.

“Today, the explosion occurred at the Red Deer Consortium building, and the address was Kured Street. So, we have already visited two places.”

Yuder recalled the Red Deer Consortium building he had previously visited. He hadn’t examined the surroundings thoroughly while inspecting the upper level, but he vaguely remembered that there were quite a few buildings closed even during broad daylight. That was one of the characteristics of the entertainment district where the commoners spent their nights.

‘Entertainment district…’

“Commander, do you know exactly where the entertainment district is, where Baron Willhem has reportedly increased the number

of patrol personnel?”

“Why do you ask?”

Despite questioning, Kishiar immediately recalled the information and answered.

“From what I saw when the report letter came in this morning, I think it was a place called Lemlin Street.”

“How far apart are Kured Street and Lemlin Street?”

“Do you think the two places are close?”

“There were quite a few buildings near Red Deer Consortium that seemed to operate at night. Entertainment districts are usually closely related, so I think we need to find out.”

“Very well. It’s simple to find out.”

Kishiar immediately pulled a cord, calling in a servant from outside.

“I heard that both Kured Street and Lemlin Street are good places for nightlife, can you tell me which one is better?”

The blatant mention of nightlife by the Duke of Peletta, who was seated with his young commoner lover, was truly remarkable. The servant answered politely, sniffing his nose.

“The distance between the two places is not so far… but Lemlin Street is too low-class for Your Grace to visit, Your Grace.”

“Oh, a low-class place. Very good. You must show me how low-class it is compared to the capital. Since the distance is close, I must visit both. Thank you for answering.”

“…”

The servant lost his words and withdrew, and it was clear what report he would make to Baron Willhem.

“My assistant’s intuition was correct.”

Kishiar closed the book given by Pruelle, smiling.

“Among the four candidates, it seems we’ve now determined which one to examine first.”

“Given today’s explosion, it will be chaotic for a while, making it a good time to investigate.”

“I have already instructed Nathan about that part.”

After all, Kishiar had initially found Red Deer Consortium suspicious and had intended to investigate it thoroughly. It had seemed strange from the beginning, from the younger brother of Baron Willhem acting suspiciously while guiding them to the basement to the suspected associates causing the explosion after first inspecting the place. All these actions suggested that the ordinary building was very far removed from the explosion.

The fact that Kured Street and Lemlin Street were close together was merely the final nail in the coffin.

‘If we find out what was hidden in that building, we can move on to capturing decisive evidence against Tain House.’

How far had Nahan and his associates searched the building through the explosion? Looking at Baron Willhem not yet asking for help from Kishiar and the Cavalry, it was clear that they hadn’t been severely affected, but it was likely only a matter of time.

“Well, let’s wait for the new news coming in tomorrow.”

Kishiar smiled and leaned back comfortably in his chair.

—-

The next day, Nathan Zuckerman, who had secretly inspected the explosion site all day, sat in front of Kishiar and began his report.

“The Awakeners who had infiltrated the Tainu Security Management Team headed straight to the prison, and I’m told they didn’t touch anything there.”

“Weren’t there injured soldiers and prisoners?”

“They suffered wounds when caught in the effects of the intruders using their abilities to break the encirclement, but I heard their lives were not in danger.”

“I see. What about the main building?”

“The damage there was more severe than when I first heard the news.”

Nathan Zuckerman found it difficult to examine closely, as the Tainu Knights and soldiers had surrounded the main building of the Red Deer Consortium with multiple layers, guarding it like a fortress. However, he reported that he could confirm the appearance of a large hole in the wall even from outside. The scorched earth and walls gave the impression that a tremendous force had exploded within.

“I took advantage of the confusion when the main business was suspended, and briefly infiltrated last night. I found that the second-floor safe, which I couldn’t open because of a spell, was shattered. All its contents were gone.”

“Hmm. And?”

“I couldn’t enter the basement because there were many guards, but I was able to get a sense of the situation through the

conversations they were having.”

The soldiers guarding the basement shivered as they talked about the ‘nightmarish intruders.’ Among those who had invaded the main building, there was a man with a strange power. Some soldiers who had locked eyes with him fell, screaming involuntarily, unable to move a finger, in a tale that seemed like a weird rumor.

“However, they seem to have failed to completely breach the magic around the interior and escaped halfway. If they broke the safe, I believe they safely acquired the information inside.”

“I see… Then the next move is coming soon.”

Kishiar replied with a thoughtful expression.

“You’ve done well, Nathan. Don’t approach either side too closely, keep watching the situation, and next, inspect the locations marked in this book as well.”

“Understood.”

“Ah, and don’t forget to bring chocolate cookies the next time you come to report.”

“…Understood.”

The response came, somehow a beat slower than before. Before leaving the room, Nathan Zuckerman stared at Yuder for a long time, then exhaled deeply and turned his head.

“Rest.”

And another day of reckless play continued. Some members who had been working with Ever went out and returned often under the pretext of playing outside, but since there were also many members who genuinely went out to play, no one was suspected.

Those who had been rescued from the prison in a state of memory loss were kept hidden, cared for by Priest Lusan with the help of the members. Once cleaned and cared for in a safe place, their fits noticeably decreased, but their condition did not improve enough to engage in conversation.

“I’ve been under the influence of a mind-altering power myself, so I feel that one’s own will is essential to break free from it. But creating that will require a stable environment and time. I don’t think they’ll improve in a short time, but… I want to make sure they get better.”

Having been struck down by Nahan’s power, Lusan was more dedicated than ever to the treatment of those who had lost their memories. Perhaps it was because of his efforts that they saw the light. Not long after, while Kishiar had briefly left to meet Pruelle, Lusan came with glad tidings, and Yuder was led by his hand to the room where the memory-lost were staying.

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“Yuder, sir. This morning, someone finally showed signs of consciousness!”

Lusan whispered excitedly, taking a sharp breath.

“When I was feeding her, she asked where she was. I told her it’s a safe place and that I was a priest of the Sun God, and she cried, shedding tears. I calmed her down with a touch of divine power, fearing she might collapse. She’s sleeping now, but she will wake up soon.”

In the spacious room, people who had recovered tremendously compared to before were seated. Though they still appeared dazed, they no longer screamed strange noises or scratched the walls. Considering that only a few days had passed, it was a remarkable achievement.

“Yuder, you’re here?”

“Where’s the person who showed consciousness?”

“Over there.”

Emun and Finn, who had been assisting Lusan, came over and greeted him. The bed where the person who had regained consciousness lay was in another connected room. Yuder looked down at the face of a woman with long ash-colored hair, which was curled and strewn about. In the western region, where many people had vivid and dark hair, her hair color and facial features felt foreign.

“I’ll wake her.”

Lusan, with a tense face, gently shook the woman's shoulder, and soon after, she quietly opened her eyes. Seeing Lusan, Emun, and Finn, she seemed slightly relieved, but her face turned pale with tension at the sight of Yuder, a stranger.

"Who, who are you?"

"Don't worry. You can relax. He's a colleague, working with us to help you."

The woman finally caught her breath after Lusan softly consoled her a few times. Yuder silently observed her, evaluating her condition.

'She seems to be fully aware of the situation. Communication is possible too.'

Lusan turned his head with an emotional look, as if asking for Yuder's agreement. Yuder nodded and pulled a chair to sit. Since his expression was naturally stiff, and looking down while standing might be intimidating, he needed to make the atmosphere as gentle as possible.

"Do you remember your name?"

"I, name. I, I. No, I, am."

The woman stuttered for a while, unable to form proper sentences, but as no one hurried or pressed her, her state gradually improved.

"My, my name is… Marty."

"Do you remember anything else? Like your age or hometown."

"Age. Age… Twenty… two. Hometown is, Messaria."

Messaria was a border region of Nelarn, adjacent to the Great Sarain Forest, as Yuder knew.

‘So she’s not a citizen of the Empire.’

After stating her name, age, and hometown, Marty’s eyes began to clear. As she started to understand the situation a bit more, she looked around and asked fearfully.

“But where exactly is this place? It doesn’t look like a temple.”

“This is Tainu. You were found wandering around here. What do you remember about previous events?”

“Tainu?”

Marty’s eyes widened and shook.

“Oh… Yes, that’s right. I was going to… No, I came to Tainu. But then…!”

A moment later, she screamed, clutching her head. Lusan quickly calmed her down by channeling divine power. Yuder, Emun, and Finn stepped out of the way.

“Will she be alright?”

“She’s regained her senses, so she’ll recover more soon. Call me when she wakes up again. I’ll bring the Commander with me.”

“Um… Alright.”

Emun nodded with a worried expression, but Marty rapidly regained her composure even before bringing Kishiar. Since she wanted to meet the three Cavalry members once again, they had to return to the bedroom.

“I remember now. You two, you’ve been to the Great Sarain Forest before, right? The villagers said that you were mercenaries back then, but you were actually dangerous people from the capital.”

With an astonishingly keen eye, Marty recognized Emun and Finn, whom she had only seen once. Her gaze was much sharper now, compared to her previous dull expression. Her eyes, stained with anger and frustration, scanned the faces of the Cavalry members.

“Yes … then you must have recognized us and brought us here. I really thank you for that. Otherwise, I would have already been dead.”

In truth, there were quite a few who had died before they were saved, but the members did not say that.

“The reason you saved us is not just out of pity, is it?”

With an expression that seemed unable to find the right explanation, Lusan and Emun glanced at Yuder simultaneously. Yuder opened his mouth, trying his best not to reveal his emotions.

“Yes. We were tracking the remnants of the village where you were living. To be exact, the people who did this to you.”

“I knew it. I knew it, I knew it.”

Marty, clenching her fist, opened her eyes wide and spoke.

“Do you want information from me?”

Though the quick progression of the conversation was good, Yuder answered, “You can speak slowly if it’s hard to say right now.” However, Marty promptly and firmly shook her head.

“No. I want to tell you right now. What exactly do you want to know?”

“Then, I would like to hear the reason you joined that village and everything you remember before losing your memory.”

“Okay. Since you probably know my origin already, it won’t be such a surprising story.”

Marty seemed to organize her thoughts, looking into the distance before she spoke.

“I’m from Nelarn. About a year ago, my younger brother and I were struggling to make a living and planned to go to the Empire. The Great Sarain Forest wasn’t so dangerous back then. But, unfortunately, we encountered a monster. My brother died, and I was injured, almost dying, until the villagers saved me.”

Through the Awakened villagers, Marty first saw a real Awakener. At first, she was terrified of their various appearances, but she gradually regained her stability due to their unconditional kindness. Even after recovering from her injuries, she stayed and worked in the village. Her affection for a man in the village significantly influenced her decision.

“At first, there were only really good people in the village. They saved people like me out of kindness and cared for us to live together. But the atmosphere gradually changed as Awakeners in the village left and were replaced.”

As the number of ordinary people in the village increased, the Awakeners began to divide into two factions. One insisted on not receiving ordinary people for the village’s safety and expelling them, while the other argued that living together was not bad since they were all in the same situation.

And this conflict reached its peak when monsters started occurring more frequently. They felt the need to abandon the dangerous Great Sarain Forest and move elsewhere, but they couldn't definitively decide whether to take ordinary people with them or move only with the Awakeners. The two factions of Awakeners began to grow increasingly antagonistic, and the village's atmosphere darkened.

During that time, the Cavalry appeared, and a gigantic monster that almost endangered the whole Great Sarain Forest revealed itself. Thankfully, the incident ended without any sacrifice, but only later did the villagers realize that the monster was slain by the Cavalry. Now that their village was exposed to the Cavalry, they could no longer stay there.

"At that time, strangers appeared. Among them, the village Awakeners followed a man with a horrendous scar on one side of his face with fear. He said he came to assist with the last decision related to the village relocation."

From the mere description, there was no doubt that the man was Nahan.

"After that man appeared, the Awakeners who disliked the non-Awakeners became more assertive. But that man surprisingly said it would be best to first take even people like me to the temporary shelter. I thought he was… contrary to the rumors, quite kind. Stupidly enough."

"What happened?"

"After living in the forest for a long time, everyone was overwhelmed when they came to the temporary shelter full of people. Some were hiding, but others went outside and met other people. That man observed this for a few days, and then…"

Marty, who was speaking, bit her lip tightly.

“Someone among the non-Awakeners leaked information outside.”

Of course, if it really happened, it would have been a grave mistake, but the non-Awakeners initially knew little about the village Awakeners. Protesting how they could possibly leak anything was futile; Nahan and those aligned with him would not listen.

They carried Nahan on their backs and acted as if they were finally doing what they should have been doing all along. The non-Awakeners could not stop the power of the Awakeners. Those who strongly resisted were made an example of and were either grievously wounded or killed.

And then everything ended.

“…”

“I begged several times that only those who committed the wrong should be punished, but it was in vain. All of this was a testing period, and all the village’s Awakeners agreed, they said. I couldn’t believe it, so I asked to see my lover, but even that was denied.”

“…Your lover?”

Emun, who had been listening quietly, asked with a furrowed face.

“The man I said I met in the village earlier and grew fond of, he’s my lover. I thought he wouldn’t agree to such a thing, but now… I don’t know.”

Yuder then understood the burning look of anger and despair in her eyes.

‘She feels betrayed.’

“Whether you send me back to Nelarn or imprison me in the Empire’s dungeon, I don’t care now. But I can never forgive them.”

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Chapter 355

Marty had not shed a single tear until she finished her story. A person so resolute to decide to leave her hometown for the Empire, and so steadfast to find a new life even after her younger brother's death, it was possible for her to regain her composure so quickly.

Yuder wanted to ask her more details about Nahan and the Awakeners around him, but decided to leave that part for later, entrusting it to Lusan or others. Yuder organized the newly discovered information as he left the room.

The first impressions when they found those who had lost their memories, and the story that Marty told were not much different. They were victims of a civil strife that took place within the Star of Nagran. The appearance of those who would have died quickly or would have been killed if not saved by the Cavalry made them guess the blind hatred harbored by Nahan and his followers.

'If they had followed a similar path in my previous life, there would be no doubt that they perished in the civil strife.'

Nahan's power was strong. His goal to unconditionally protect the same Awakeners was clear. It was not difficult to imagine how reassuring he must have felt to the Awakeners who harbored hatred and fear for the non-Awakeners. Since they even got rid of the non-Awakeners who knew the internal information and took the power from the group that had courted the non-Awakeners, it must have been quite a rewarding result for them.

Wielding power was so easy and convenient. However, they could not achieve everything with power alone. The outcome of their previous life, and Yuder himself, who had proven it with his life, were living witnesses to that.

“Yuder.”

Kishiar called him from not far away. His coldly moving mind momentarily melted weakly like eyes exposed to sunlight. Yuder stopped thinking and looked at the smiling face of the man who waved his hand lightly.

“I heard you were suddenly called by Priest Lusan. What happened?”

“One of the people under the Priest’s care regained consciousness today, so I visited.”

“Really? How much did they remember about the situation before and after?”

“She remembered most of it. The circumstances were not much different from what we suspected. I decided to ask the details after she recovered a bit more and came out first.”

Kishiar was silent for a while after hearing Marty’s story.

“Nahan has cunningly used his means. He is quite skilled at fueling people’s hatred.”

“I think so too.”

“I wonder where that madness comes from at this point. Don’t you?”

Yuder had never been curious about Nahan’s circumstances, so he kept his mouth shut for a moment. Even knowing that Kishiar’s interest in Nahan was pure curiosity unrelated to his illusion ability, a sudden cold sensation lingered around his heart.

“There’s no need to be curious about such a person. He will not last long and will destroy himself.”

“That’s quite a prophetic statement. You didn’t awaken a prophecy ability, did you?”

“…”

“I’m kidding. But when my assistant says something like that, it doesn’t feel like just words.”

Kishiar, who couldn’t think of Yuder as someone who had truly seen the end, spoke in a light tone, making a chilling sound.

“I don’t think I can achieve what they want in that way either. But knowing the cause may allow us to find ways to prevent innocent victims more quickly, or perhaps give me a warning not to become such a monster, right?”

The words that one could gain caution so as not to become a monster like Nahan somehow lingered in Yuder’s heart.

“Why would you say that, Commander? No matter what you do, you will not become like that.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

Kishiar’s face momentarily looked surprised as he answered, but he soon smiled with genuine warmth.

“But not forgetting to be cautious is also for the path I want to tread. If I’m always off my guard, I might easily fall into self-centered thinking. Humans are such beings. I’m no exception.”

Kishiar defined himself as such a human without the slightest shame. Yuder, hearing his words, suddenly wondered how he had been. Had he ever been conscious of his weakness and strived not to forget the possibility of making a mistake? Had he ever possessed caution that a monster caught in hatred and madness could become him?

‘…I never have.’

Even if he made an effort from now on, it wouldn’t work. He was born such a human. It was truly fortunate that not him, but Kishiar, was the commander of the Cavalry. Yuder recalled how wise his decision to not take the Deputy Commander position in this life was, and felt relieved.

“You don’t need to worry, Commander. You’ll never commit such a folly.”

“Hmm. My assistant thinks too highly of me.”

“If it’s burdensome, I’ll stop speaking.”

“Why would it be?”

Kishiar pulled him close by the waist and affectionately leaned his head on him. Just then, the servants of Baron Willhem, passing through a nearby corridor, were visibly shocked, covering their eyes and dodging out of the way. Red eyes followed their retreating forms, smiling sweetly.

“I told you, I like being depended on.”

–-

“Are you here, Nahan?”

The door burst open, and several people entered. Nahan, who had been reading the piled documents on the table, calmly looked up, unfazed by their rough entry.

“What’s the matter, brothers?”

“Damn it. Stop with that ‘brother’ talk. Why are we your brothers?”

“What do you want with Nahan? If you’ve come to pick a fight, get lost.”

The ones sitting beside Nahan furrowed their brows and stood up, lightly assuming a defensive stance. Between Nahan’s associates and the others, a sharp and tense atmosphere instantly filled the air.

“All of Tainu is in turmoil because of what you’ve done. Even our fellow Awakeners, who aren’t culprits, can’t go outside because of the rumors that Awakeners are the culprit. Don’t you care?”

The Awakener shouting about how long this would continue was met with a sneer from Nahan’s side.

“Is this all Nahan’s fault now? It’s probably because of the non-Awakeners who leaked our existence and the rotten Tain Duke!”

“You haven’t even clearly shown proof that the non-Awakeners leaked our existence! You’ve gone mad. Why are you doing this?”

“Because, unlike you cowards, we have the power to avenge our brothers and sisters!”

The atmosphere suddenly became even more frigid. One of Nahan’s Awakener associates growled harshly, trying to calm his breath, then finally couldn’t bear it and burst out again.

“You who snuck into the security management team on the time when we were digging into the Tain Duke’s secrets are no different from us. If you can’t help with important matters, at least stop holding us back.”

The faces of the moderate Awakeners went pale.

“We went to find those who were driven out! We’re different from you!”

“So, did you find them?”

Nahan, who had been quietly watching the fight between the two factions until now, finally spoke. Though he uttered his words slowly, everyone fell silent in an instant. Even the moderate faction Awakeners, who were suppressing their anger, couldn’t help but cower. There was a fearsome presence about him that forced them to do so. Whether it was because of the terrifying scar on his face, brazenly displayed, or because of his strange calmness that never allowed him to lose his temper with his Awakener comrades, no one knew. But they did sometimes feel a terrifying sensation from him whenever he moved.

“We… we couldn’t find them.”

One of the moderate faction Awakeners stammered a forced reply, trembling lips betraying his fear. Nahan sighed silently. He put down the documents he had been holding and rose from his seat. As he did, his overcoat, draped over his shoulders, fell, revealing a recently treated wound on his shoulder to everyone present.

It was an injury Nahan had sustained just before leaving the Great Sarain Forest, inflicted by the Cavalry. The wound had been so deep that, had there not been someone with even a meager ability to staunch the blood, there were talks that his arm might have had to be amputated. That’s why even though it had healed to some extent, he still had difficulty moving that arm. However, this did not affect Nahan’s abilities.

“Brothers, if you went that far using us as bait, you should have at least found some trace.”

“Are… are you mocking us now?”

“I am always sincere.”

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Chapter 356

Nahan’s gaze swept over the moderate faction of Awakeners, answering with an expressionless face. They quickly lowered their heads to avoid eye contact with Nahan, due to the rumor that meeting his gaze would cast them into an illusion. In reality, the ability was only effective within a specific range, so whether or not they met his eyes, it had no relation to the manifestation of his power, but Nahan said nothing. Instead, he spoke other words.

“I asked earlier what you were doing while all the Awakened brothers and sisters of Tainu were suffering.”

“…”

“I’ve been reading documents brought from upper management connected to the Tainu operation, searching for information. It’s almost finished now.”

Nahan’s gaze moved meaningfully toward a stack of papers beside him.

“Even now, there are people out there filled with intentions to imprison and sell our brothers and sisters like objects. How long must we leave them alone? The more we ignore it, the more victims like Ershi will arise, unable to fight back and dying.”

The eyes of the moderate Awakeners wavered at his smooth, flowing voice. They too had fled their homes and arrived at the Star of Nagran, knowing the suffering of their comrades better than anyone.

“The current inconvenience is nothing compared to that. Soon, Ershi and other brothers and sisters will step forward to rescue the

victims of human trafficking hidden in Tainu's household, so bear it until then."

The moderate Awakeners lost momentum at his seemingly unobjectionable words, while those following Nahan straightened their shoulders with a solid expression. It seemed like the battle's conclusion had been reached. But then, a young man who was among the moderates quivered his lips and spoke.

"Nice words. Bear it? What exactly?"

"…"

"Driving away those we lived with, killing people… All we'll end up doing is revealing our existence we tried to hide. To my eyes, you're just gathering the strength of your comrades to instigate Ershi to take revenge on Tainu's house. Does the sage know about how big this has gotten?"

"That's, that's right."

Fueled by the angry shout, the moderate Awakeners muttered in agreement.

"The sage I knew wanted to create a quiet sanctuary for us. If he knew what you're doing here…!"

"I wonder. Will anything change if he knows?"

Nahan retorted, having been listening silently. The moderate Awakeners closed their mouths again.

"…What?"

"Brothers. It seems like you've stayed in the sanctuary too long and don't remember, but think about it."

A twisted smile appeared on his half-scarred, burnt face.

“Did the brothers come here voluntarily? We were all saved by the hands of our brothers and sisters. the Star of Nagran was started that way from the beginning.”

His voice, so calm as to be terrifying, resonated.

“We rose to save ourselves and our brothers and sisters. We’re just doing the same thing now; nothing has changed.”

“…”

“The sage entrusted me with this matter, so I’m handling it my way. Is that wrong?”

However, the young moderate Awakener did not back down from Nahan’s words.

“Your words are always clever. Is rescuing comrades who have been victimized and coming together the same as killing innocent non-Awakeners and waging war with Tainu’s house like you? Don’t make me laugh! You are just a vengeful ghost!”

Nahan rarely had a moment of silence. Everyone thought that for the first time, he might show anger towards another Awakener, but a moment later, he simply exhaled a long breath and offered a kind smile.

“Yes, my brothers. If it is too difficult, I recommend you head to the safe southern base. I understand that not all my brothers and sisters can move with me.”

Nahan closed his mouth and said no more. In the end, the moderate Awakeners had to leave the room without gaining anything, as if being driven out.

“…Damn it!”

A young moderate Awakener, filled with frustration, pounded the wall and hung his head, taking a deep breath.

“It’s always cunning words with him. I lost Marty because I was fooled by his tongue… What else does he intend to do here…!”

“Calm down, Robel.”

Other moderate Awakeners gathered around him and offered words of comfort.

“The fact that we couldn’t find Marty’s body might mean she is still alive. Those guys said they didn’t kill them.”

“If Nahan uses his ability, even a healthy person will smash their head against a wall and commit suicide. What difference does it make that they didn’t kill her immediately after falling victim to such a horrifying ability?”

The man called Robel pounded the wall a few more times to suppress his anger.

“If they’re not with the security management team, where the hell are we supposed to go!”

“Hey, Robel. How about we go south and inform the sage of this matter and ask for his help?”

One of the moderate Awakeners beside him whispered.

“The probability is high that he doesn’t know things have escalated this far, so if we ask for help, won’t he surely assist us?”

“Don’t talk nonsense. That’s exactly what Nahan wants. You still don’t understand even after being fooled once?”

Robel yelled out, denying the suggestion.

“Those bastards want us to leave here. That way they can handle matters as they please!”

“…”

The moderate Awakeners looked at each other’s faces powerlessly. Ever since the news of a traitor among the Non-Awakeners and the rapid ‘clean-up’ operation, many who were originally close to the moderate faction had begun to think Nahan was right. Now, only about half a dozen, including Robel, were left to look for the expelled Non-Awakeners. Most of them had deep connections to the expelled.

Having belatedly gathered some information, they went to the security management team but found no one. The situation seemed hopeless.

“Robel, Robel!”

Just then, someone ran up and tapped Robel on the back.

“New information has come in. The expelled ones might be in a completely different place than we expected!”

“What?”

The moderate Awakeners, who had been sunk in despair, all lifted their heads at once. The one who ran in informed them with a flushed face.

“Did you know that part of the Cavalry was here right now? Just before we went to the security management team, a few Cavalry members visited there!”

“Is that true?”

Robel quickly grabbed his shoulder and asked.

“The Cavalry went there?”

“It seems to have been a secret externally, but I found out by eavesdropping on soldiers chatting at the main gate. When those people left, a large number of carriages followed them. Those on them could have been the expelled ones.

The Awakeners’ gazes intertwined complexly. Robel’s expression, too, was complicated for a different reason than before. However, he quickly composed himself and nodded with a determined face.

“…Yes. It’s worth checking out.”

“It’s too dangerous. Have you already forgotten what we saw in the forest? They are the ones who could kill a monster the size of a house on their own!”

“I saw it. But they killed the monsters with that strength, not attacking us. When I spoke to them directly, they didn’t seem like those who wouldn’t communicate at all.”

“You say that because you don’t know they’re after us?”

No matter what others said, Robel had already made up his mind firmly. He deeply exhaled and took in the appearance of his Awakened companions.

“I don’t intend to ask you to come with me. First, I’ll find out where the Cavalry is staying and whether we can enter without being noticed. I’ll contact you once a day, but if you don’t hear from me even after a week, don’t look for me, go south.”

“Robel…”

“Tell the people on my side that I ran out in anger. Try not to be together if possible.”

Robel gritted his teeth, recalling Nahan he had just seen. He was someone who could do anything, even indirectly, to achieve his will. Thinking of the division of the village that started after his arrival and the current situation, he was literally trembling.

Robel left a brief greeting to his companions and turned away. His mind was filled with thoughts of his lost lover.

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In the days that followed, those working in the mansion of Baron Willhem had become as accustomed to Kishiar's debauchery as they could. Building towers with the Baron's treasured liquor, playing with it, disregarding dining etiquette, and flirting with the male lover was nothing to them.

With his unruly subordinates, he turned the reception room into a playground, laughing and tossing balls, or drunkenly lying on a table and throwing tantrums for his assistant to get him water. Many were speechless, watching him commit accidents that even a five-year-old noble child wouldn't do. Those who observed were mortified.

"The Duke continues to act in ways we can't even imagine, so the servants in the annex dislike going there."

"Is that all? The Duke keeps playing?"

"Yes."

With dark circles under his eyes, Baron Willhem pressed his throbbing head, staring at the empty liquor collection. Originally, it had contained many precious liquors he had collected since he was young. However, now everything had been ruined by Kishiar's hand, leaving nothing behind.

"…Whether an explosion happens or not, I'm relieved that I don't care, but with this, I don't know if I'm raising a parasite or taking care

of a precious imperial family member’s body.”

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Chapter 357

Baron Willhem, whose cruelty knew no bounds, had dismissed the report about Kishiar and the Cavalry with a wave of his hand, as if there was no need to speak further on the matter.

“My head aches, so let’s leave it at that. How is the First Prince Pruelle? Does he seem like he still has no intention of leaving?”

“Yes. When I casually asked, he said that he needs to take some more time to return, so that His Grace the Duke’s anger about him suddenly coming here will subside.”

“I see. Indeed, it’s fitting for a person of the same bloodline to know His Grace the Duke’s temperament well.”

Baron Willhem, who had replied indifferently, changed his complexion as if something had crossed his mind at the mention of the word ‘Duke.’

“By the way, how are things with the children? I told them to meet with him daily and build a rapport, if possible. I have been too preoccupied to ask if it’s going well.”

Baron Willhem had been making efforts to have his daughters meet with Pruelle whenever the opportunity arose. There were more instances of marriages within the branch family than with external noble houses. If things went well, one of his daughters might become the next duchess, and even if it didn’t work out, at least the relationship with the main house could be strengthened. It was not a bad idea. The current duke and his wife had no interest in children, so capturing the heart of the one to be married was enough, and this was one of the reasons he was eyeing Pruelle.

“They have met a few times, I hear. But…”

“But what?”

Baron Willhem, who had recently come to hate the word ‘but’ more than anything else in the world, sharply asked. The servant, who had been making the report, reflexively hunched his shoulders and cautiously continued.

“The First Prince has been too preoccupied with taking care of the cat he brought this time to invite the young ladies into his room. Moreover… since finding the cat, he has frequently dined with His Grace Duke Peletta, making it difficult for the young ladies to visit.”

“…What? A cat?”

Baron Willhem’s eyebrows writhed uncontrollably. He vaguely recalled a report about Pruelle losing a cat and the servants of the main house being distressed.

“That must be an excuse, you stupid. Why did you not mention first that the two were meeting so frequently!”

“My, my apologies. But Your Lordship has been rather busy lately for Tainu. I was overstepping my boundaries and worried that if I delivered even the trivial reports surrounding the First Prince, it might cause strain on your body.”

“Even if I’m busy, still!”

Though he did lose his temper, Baron Willhem felt a little better at the servant’s words. At a time when the Duke of Tainu’s insulting messages were pouring in several times a day, and there was no sign of suspicious movements in Tainu settling down, knowing that there was someone who understood his situation satisfied him. His hot-headed thoughts cooled down, and his usual shrewd mind began to whirl.

“Hmm, no… Come to think of it, it might not be entirely a bad thing.”

The Duke of Tainu had been harassing Baron Willhem day and night with the task of secretly and securely moving the ‘items’ hidden in Tainu and chasing suspicious movements. It was quite like him to refuse to come in person even if he was so troubled, instead only losing his temper.

Because of this, he had not been able to focus on the investigation of Duke Peletta, or the recruitment of the Cavalry member who had achieved merit in the Great Sarain Forest, as he had originally planned. If Pruelle was taking over these roles, then it was rather a welcome matter.

‘Besides, if it had been before, I wouldn’t know, but now the First Prince… He clearly seems to have the intention to become the successor. Since he has started showing interest in family matters, his approach to Duke Peletta must surely be more than simple.’

Pruelle had not been here long when he subtly asked Baron Willhem about the secret trade. The Baron was deeply surprised. He had thought that Pruelle, who had been known for his lack of interest in family matters until now, had finally come to his senses and was laying the groundwork for his succession.

Anyone who was not a stranger would know about the recent Great Sarain Forest incident in their sphere of influence, so it appeared that Pruelle was striving to grasp information about it himself. Baron Willhem stroked his chin, unable to imagine that his speculation was completely wrong from beginning to end.

“You’ve found your way even though I was too busy to properly care for you; truly wise of you. I must inquire whether you can meet him and assist in the matter of Duke Peletta’s new sword and that impudent Cavalry member’s persuasion.”

“Indeed, my lord, you read all the plays even while sitting down.”

“You rascal, your tongue is indeed smooth.”

Baron Willhem laughed heartily for the first time in a while. Then he began to check on the real matters he had been putting off due to a headache.

“Is there still no contact from the Commander of the Tainu Knights?”

“Yes. Those injured in the explosion still haven’t come to their senses, so they don’t even know the appearance of the culprit.”

“Laziness and pathetic. How are they sleeping at night? Is it over if they can’t catch him just because they don’t know what he looks like? They should use some other means. They’re just repeating the same interrogations without thinking of finding a new method.”

Baron Willhem rubbed his forehead, not holding back his insults towards the Commander of Tainu’s Knights, Jeymer Phil.

“I suppose it’s because they don’t know what was stolen from the Red Deer Consortium. I don’t think those lowly people could read what was inside, but the fact that it was stolen leaves me with no excuse to Duke Tain!”

Baron Willhem recalled the dizziness he felt when he found out that the safe he had been secretly keeping in the Red Deer Consortium was ransacked by intruders. He didn’t tell the Commander of the Knights or others, but inside were documents containing records of the new trade business that Duke Tain had been pushing, including the ledger of goods going back and forth during the operation.

To the ordinary eye, it would seem like a standard ledger, filled with all sorts of complicated numbers and nouns designated by

code, but if one knew the content, the story was completely different. Even reading it properly would allow them to trace the flow of goods from the West through the Great Sarain Forest to Tainu.

“Those scoundrels are definitely targeting Duke Tain’s trading business. So the next target must be the intermediate base. They must have infiltrated the Red Deer Consortium and the security management team to find it…”

“Why on earth those lowly people are making such a fuss over this, I cannot even guess.”

At the housekeeper’s words, Baron Willhem snorted and replied,

“What would those lowly people be thinking? You must look at the shadow behind them.”

“Shadow, you say?”

“Those who were displeased with Duke Tain’s business. It could be movement within the family, or perhaps something else. It’s not for me to know, but the answer is obvious, isn’t it?”

“Ah, I see.”

“They must be hiring Awakeners to bother us, no doubt about it. With their protection, that’s why so many of them can hide like rats inside Tainu.”

“What will you do next, my lord?”

“Duke Tain said yesterday that he can wait no longer. Keeping the goods in Tainu any longer is too risky. So, from today on, rather than just focusing on catching those guys, we must find time to think about ways to move the goods.”

In the meantime, Baron Willhem doubled his patrols and conducted surprise inspections in order to find a group of Awakeners who had killed Tainu Knights in the Great Sarain Forest and dared to come here and cause the explosion. However, the culprits had vanished without a trace. Days were wasted with no results, and the frustration had reached a point where merely reading Duke Tain's curses made Willhem's head ache. He could no longer solely focus on this matter.

"I must call that lazy Knight Commander and order him to search even the places that have not been searched yet. Check everywhere, including already verified inns, mercenary groups, and places recently visited by strangers. If anything is suspicious, even if it's from here, arrest them all."

Though it was a harsh measure that would further tighten the already tense atmosphere in Tainu, there was no other choice.

'What can I do? At least this way, I'll have a chance to breathe.'

Dealing with Duke Tain, who seemed to have no consideration for others' situations, was no easy task. If Willhem failed to produce results, he might face an assassin sent by the Duke tomorrow. So, he had to do this to appease the Duke's fury.

"My Lord! Just now, just now, Commander Phil has sent news."

At that moment, a servant urgently knocked on the door and raised his voice.

"That stupid fool must have finally woken up and written a report. Let him in!"

However, the news from Commander Jeymer Phil was not a simple report.

“I apologize, but just now, several warehouses of the Red Deer Consortium were completely destroyed!”

“What?”

Baron Willhem froze momentarily.

“The assessment of casualties and property damage is ongoing, and coincidentally, Advisor Graham Willhem was also severely injured.”

“Graham?”

Baron Willhem opened and closed his mouth several times before finally rising to his feet, his face pale.

“Lead the way! I must see it myself. Hurry!”

–-

“There seem to be few servants wandering about today, don’t you think, assistant?”

“Yes.”

Yuder, stretched out in the reception room, calmly replied as he sat next to Kishiar, who was looking out the window with the door open.

“It was fun playing games under their watchful eyes, but it’s not so motivating without an audience.”

Had Baron Willhem’s servants heard this, they would have wept, but Kishiar was merely jesting.

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Chapter 358

“Well, it can’t be helped. Such an incident happened yesterday, after all.”

Yesterday, almost simultaneously, numerous messages were received from many members and knights who were outside. The reports were related to mysterious events that occurred in various parts of Tainu.

The beginning was an explosion that occurred in the densely packed warehouse area located in the north gate. As the knights rushed to handle the situation, leaving their posts, prominent sites throughout Tainu were wantonly damaged. Most of them were places related to the Tain family. In particular, the statue in Finnard Square, a pride of Tainu, had been defaced with curses denouncing the Tain’s work, delivering quite a shock.

Pruelle, who had been monitoring Baron Willhem’s situation from the main building, reported that he had hurriedly gone outside, returning a few hours later with a distraught face. The locations where the incidents occurred were quickly closed off before many could see, and the city gates that had been guarding the boundaries were also locked and bolted.

The city was gripped by deep fear and confusion, but Baron Willhem didn’t issue any official announcement even as a day passed. As a result, the atmosphere in the mansion had also become gravely subdued since yesterday.

‘He’s probably asking for more support from the Tain family now, but…’

There was no strength left in the Tain family to help this place. Assistance was bound to fall through.

Even though Kishiar and his Cavalry had primary jurisdiction over matters related to the Awakeners, they had feigned ignorance about all this until now. However, with this incident, it felt as if Duke Tain and Baron Willhem would soon realize that they couldn't endure on their own for long, and the day they would reach out for help seemed not far off.

In the meantime, a few more people among those who had lost their memory and were being looked after by Priest Lusan had regained their consciousness, and Enon had dashed into Nathan Zuckerman's room to observe the hidden Pethuamet every time he returned.

Although Ever and the members who were searching for the place where the Star of Nagran was lingering hadn't produced any significant results, Kishiar didn't rush them. After all, the Star of Nagran would reveal itself soon enough, even if they didn't find it here; it was not urgent. Entrusting the task to the members was more about letting them gain experience than it being truly necessary.

Since Kishiar suggested spending the afternoon leisurely with tea and cookies, Yuder stood up and followed him. However, as soon as they arrived at the residence, they found Baron Willhem's butler, who seemed to have been waiting for them, and politely bowed.

"I have a message for Duke Peletta."

"What's the matter?"

"Today is Baron Willhem's 20th wedding anniversary, and a special dinner has been arranged. If distinguished guests like you would honor us with your presence, it would make the occasion even more glorious. Therefore, I've brought the Baron's invitation, hoping that you might grace us with your presence."

The butler politely inclined his head, apologizing that the Baron was too busy with official duties to deliver the brief message in person. It was almost the first time that Baron Willhem had sent his butler for something as minor as a short note, rather than sending one of the servants.

Kishiar, reading the short note handed over by the butler, smiled and opened his mouth.

“A wedding anniversary indeed, a joyous occasion. Will Prince Pruelle also attend today’s gathering?”

“Yes. All the members of the Willhem family and Prince Pruelle have expressed their intention to attend.”

“Good. Then my assistant and I will also attend.”

“Thank you. The Baron and his wife will be most thrilled.”

‘Thrilled, he says. He has a way with words.’

Somehow, the attempt to find an excuse and survey the situation was not even amusing. The butler bowed politely to the very end and then withdrew. Kishiar entered the lodgings, releasing a laugh he had been holding back.

“I guess they’re desperate enough not to refuse even when I invited my assistant to go with me. It seems we’ll have to postpone today’s enjoyable snack time.”

“It’s just mealtime, so there’s nothing to prepare, right?”

“Nothing to prepare, you say? What nonsense is that?”

Kishiar responded gravely.

“I must show something entirely different from last time.”

—-

“Welcome, Duke Peletta and… uh.”

Come evening, in the dimly lit front gate of the mansion, the butler who had greeted them stumbled over his words for the first time. Yuder internally sighed, watching the direction of his gaze.

“What are you doing? Guide us.”

“Ah, yes. I apologize. I will guide you immediately. Please follow me.”

The special dinner to celebrate Baron Willhem’s wedding anniversary was held in the hall where the feast had been conducted before. Though the number of attendees was much fewer, the decorations felt even more extravagant. It seemed unbelievable that just yesterday, all manner of horrific events had taken place within Tainu. The grandeur was boundless.

“His Highness Duke Peletta and his Assistant Sir Yuder Aile have arrived.”

At the formal announcement, those already seated stood up in unison. There was the more emaciated Baron Willhem, his gaunt wife, and Pruelle with his red hair softly half-drawn up; Two girls in splendid dresses and two men resembling Baron Willhem, and their wives, whom they had brought along, were new faces.

Though the attendees were diverse, their expressions were similar. They all failed to conceal their surprise as they looked in this direction.

Yuder, standing a step behind, glanced at Kishiar, who was smiling brightly. His golden hair, matched with a blue ceremonial dress and belt, always seemed sufficient to captivate souls, but today it was harder to look at him so easily.

Yuder’s seat was right next to where Kishiar sat. As soon as he sat down, Pruelle whispered in a very low voice.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen you in formal wear, Sir Aile. I thought you were someone else. It suits you well?”

“…You flatter me.”

At the previous feast, all the Cavalry members wore Cavalry uniforms instead of formal wear. However, Yuder was now attending, dressed in the formal wear that Kishiar had forcibly bought in Tainu.

If Yuder had known beforehand that Kishiar’s grave declaration of ‘an entirely different appearance’ meant his attire, he would have said it would be better to bring Nathan Zuckerman instead. However, not knowing, he had no choice but to spend a strenuous time moving like a doll being forcibly dressed for several hours.

Kishiar seemed to have been bothered all along by the fact that Yuder had left all the gifted items untouched in their packaging. After laying out and repeatedly examining all the unpacked items, he chose a deep navy formal wear and a white cape. The garment, with elegant patterns embroidered in silver threads and generously studded with jewels, was the most extravagant clothing Yuder had ever worn, even including his Yudrain Aile days.

Adding the gloves and shoes bought at that time, Yuder felt like a walking pile of jewels.

Kishiar seemed quite pleased to have matched his clothing with Yuder’s, but Yuder was not particularly thrilled. Fortunately, in this setting, the ornate clothing did not appear overly extravagant.

As he sighed again, Baron Willhem hurriedly collected himself and began to speak.

“Thank you for gracing us with your presence today, Your Highness. My wife, Elise, has met you before, but you’ll be meeting our two daughters, Megalin and Melinda, and my two siblings for the first time. This is my second brother, Fayfe, and his wife Nellisabel, and my third brother, Gellian, and his wife Ganiyette.”

“Did you not have one more sibling? I remember meeting another when I went shopping at a certain store. I guess he didn’t make it today.”

“Ah, you must have met Graham. I’m sorry, but he couldn’t attend due to an accident yesterday that has left him feeling unwell.”

“Is that so? That’s unfortunate.”

Kishiar opened his eyes wide and replied in a tone of regret. He wondered how likely it was that the ‘accident’ Graham Willhem had suffered yesterday was unrelated to the events that had overturned the whole of Tainu. Though he didn’t know for certain, it seemed highly unlikely.

The individuals introduced by Baron Willhem all bowed politely. The Baron’s two daughters seemed spellbound by Kishiar’s face, and not even a pinch on the arm from the Baron’s wife and a bite on her lip could bring them to their senses. The intentions of the Baron in bringing his precious daughters, who he had not brought to a previous banquet, to this meal were all too apparent, but given the circumstances, it was merely amusing.

‘He must be hoping to make a good impression, so he’s even recruiting his daughters. How typical.’

Soon, the meal began. There were many elaborately decorated dishes in honor of the wedding anniversary. The fresh flowers decorating the table were fragrant, and, to an observer, everyone seemed amiable. As Baron Willhem was questioning Kishiar about his life in the annex, Yuder was conversing with Pruelle.

“Did you leave the cat in the room?”

“Yes. I fed him before coming, but I’m a little worried. He doesn’t eat well when I’m not there.”

“I heard that the First Prince brought a cute cat this time.”

The one who interjected in their conversation was the young wife who had come with Baron Willhem’s second sibling.

“I’m really curious about what the cat looks like.”

Pruelle paused briefly before describing the cat with a smiling face: a creature with yellow fur and green eyes. His lips were undoubtedly upturned, but his voice lacked warmth. Yet, the interest in them did not wane at all. Following the wife, Baron Willhem’s sibling eagerly interjected as if he had been waiting for his turn to speak.

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Chapter 359

“I had heard rumors that Sir Aile is a promising talent with a bright future, but seeing him in person today, I indeed think it’s true. May I ask where you hail from?”

A promising talent with a bright future. They couldn’t outright say Kishiar’s commoner lover, so they beat around the bush, making it all the more ridiculous.

“The central region.”

“Oh, the central region. Then this must be your first time in the west. How do you find it? Tainu is as renowned as the capital, a city with a rich tradition.”

If they had considered the current situation in the proud Tainu, they wouldn’t have been able to speak so confidently. Though it wasn’t new, it strangely soured the taste in his mouth that, despite the uproar of the recent incident, the nobles seemed completely disinterested in its cause.

Although Yuder said nothing, Baron Willhem’s younger sibling, a married couple, prattled on about how impressive Tainu and the west were. They spoke with elegant words, but they couldn’t completely conceal the condescending energy in their eyes.

When they finally began to offer to introduce Yuder to a few famous places among the Tainu nobility, Pruelle intervened and cut off the conversation.

“I’ve already introduced Tainu to Sir Aile sufficiently, so there’s no need to continue.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, indeed. The First Prince’s judgment is truly exceptional, perhaps because you inherit the blood of Duke Tain.”

Baron Willhem’s younger sibling quickly praised Pruelle and smiled.

‘The judgment of the First Prince. It’s certainly exceptional.’

To hear it likened to his father’s judgment, who was oblivious to his household’s ruin and gambled everything away, was almost an insult from Pruelle’s perspective.

“Let’s talk about the Cavalry then. The heroes of the west who saved the Great Sarain Forest! I had many questions even before coming here.”

“Is that so? Sir Aile is also an Awakener, right? What abilities do you possess?”

“…”

Pruelle frowned, about to open his mouth again, but Yuder stopped him with a glance. This gathering was clearly orchestrated to elicit some reaction from Kishiar and himself. Although grateful for Pruelle standing up for him, he had been in far more dangerous situations. From the perspective of Commander Yudrain Aile, this was nothing.

Before answering, he glanced to the side and saw Kishiar, who had been subtly watching them even while engaged with Baron Willhem’s couple. Kishiar flashed a faint smile, almost undetectable by others, as if telling him to do as he pleased.

He knew Yuder needed no help in this situation.

“I use the sword a little and can control some nature-related powers.”

“Like fire or water?”

“Yes.”

“I’d love to see that sometime, but I guess not here. Pity. I once heard a mage say that water summoned by Awakener isn’t real water and you can’t drink it. Well, I’m sure that’s not true, but I’m curious.”

“Is that so?”

Yuder looked at the Baron’s younger brother who had said this. His glass was almost empty. Yuder moved a finger slightly, exerting his power. A stream of water, created from thin air, gracefully spiraled into the glass.

The Baron’s younger brother screamed. In his shock, he tossed the glass, causing his wife to shriek in turn. The distant servants gasped in surprise, and the shattered glass and water scattered all around.

“What is this sudden mischief!”

Baron Willhem, who had not properly seen what had happened while focusing all his attention on Kishiar, directed his anger at Yuder. Yuder calmly responded, deflecting the gazes of those looking at him.

“I simply filled an empty glass with water created by the Awakener’s power because you wondered if you could drink it. I thought you’d be pleased to say you’ve tasted water made by an Awakener if the same thing happened again, but it’s a shame the glass has broken.”

“…What?”

“If you bring a new glass, I can fill it again. Just let me know.”

It was a bit stifling to use even a slight amount of power, but filling one more glass of water was not a problem.

People in Willhem’s family lost their words at Yuder’s attitude, talking as if it was nothing. A moment ago, the one they inwardly found amusing now felt like an incomprehensible, unknown monster. Baron Willhem tried to get angrier, but Kishiar spoke even more quickly.

“Oh dear. It’s such a shame that our cute assistant finally demonstrated his ability, and it’s only a glass of water that frightens you so. Your siblings must all have weak constitutions, Baron.”

“That…”

“What a noble and joyful opportunity to receive a glass of water filled by the hero who saved the Great Sarain Forest, isn’t it?”

In the end, Baron Willhem agreed to Kishiar’s words with a pale, embarrassed face.

“Yes, Your Highness’ words… are right. My siblings have been weak since childhood and have caused concern. I apologize…”

Baron Willhem’s sibling stood up from his seat, trembling. His eyes briefly looked at Yuder in fear before moving away.

“A new glass is… unnecessary. My wife and I need to change our clothes, so we will have to leave our seats for a while.”

He hastily left with his wife, half bowing to Kishiar. Those who remained could no longer dare to look at Yuder as they had before.

Except for Kishiar, who raised his glass with a smile, it was only Pruelle who had bitten his lip to hold back laughter.

The 20th wedding anniversary dinner of Baron Willhem ended in an extremely chilly atmosphere. The Baron had actually intended to obtain a cooperation agreement from Kishiar first, but in the end, he could hardly even mention it.

After the dinner ended and the Baron had excused himself for urgent business, Pruelle followed the two. Standing at the crossroad leading to the annex, he laughed for a while, avoiding others' attention.

"Tain's First Prince, it seems your mind was quite refreshed by what happened earlier."

"Call me Elle. I'm fed up with being called by my family name even here."

Pruelle, responding with a smile and taking a long breath as he looked up at the night sky, seemed much more comfortable as his neatly tied hair was tousled by the wind.

"Now that I've become an adult and am likely to be the successor, they fawn over me like that, but it wasn't like that when I was young. Often mistaken for a bastard because of my face unlike my siblings or parents."

"Is that so? To me, you look astonishingly like the portrait of the first Duke Tain."

"Yes. Those who know history well are aware that I resemble my ancestors more. But not everyone knows that."

After answering, Pruelle turned to Yuder and smiled mischievously.

“I’m glad I didn’t overstep. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to see your brilliant move. Thank you for letting me enjoy such a great spectacle.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Ah, but I’ve only just remembered… I actually had more to say about Nipollen, but I didn’t get to mention it because of them.”

“Was there a change?”

As Kishiar asked, Pruelle wore a thoughtful expression, muttering, “Hmm……”

“I’m not sure if it can be called a change, but something odd happened yesterday.”

Pruelle had most of his meals brought to his room. It was a natural thing since he had to take care of Nipollen. Nipollen would typically be highly guarded or hidden when others entered the room, but yesterday, he did not show such behavior towards the servant who brought his meal. Pruelle was quite surprised to watch Nipollen throughout the process of the servant moving the dishes, even smelling them from a distance like a cat sniffing.

“I might have ignored it before, but considering our previous experience, I thought it would be best to mention it.”

Since it had been almost confirmed that Nipollen possessed the ability to distinguish Awakeners besides the ability to transform, it seemed necessary to pay attention to this information.

“Hmm. Was the servant someone you’ve seen before?”

“It was the first time. When I asked, they said it was a new person.”

Kishiar’s gaze turned toward the main house.

“If they are just an Awakener hiding their identity, there is no reason to be alarmed, but considering the timing, I have several thoughts.”

“Yes. That’s why, using Nipollen as a reason, I instructed that this servant be sent to my room for meals or any tasks from now on. If you wish to see them, please let me know.”

“If they are dangerous, we shouldn’t waste time as it won’t do us any good. Shouldn’t we investigate now?”

At Yuder’s words, Kishiar lightly scratched his chin.

“That’s true. But I have people waiting for my report as soon as I return. You also have urgent matters to attend to.”

Yuder was already aware of this. While he was making all sorts of useless preparations to attend Baron Willhem’s dinner, Nathan Zuckerman and Ever had returned and conveyed that they each had matters to report.

“Then I will go alone.”

Kishiar’s eyebrows twitched slightly. Before he could speak, Yuder forcefully opened his mouth.

“Don’t worry, I’ll only be gone for a short time.”

In the end, Kishiar smiled softly.

“…I know best that my assistant is not an easy person. Go ahead.”

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Chapter 360

“It seems that Your Highness really trusts Sir Aile.”

On their way back to the main residence, Pruelle suddenly spoke.

“Well, since we share accommodations, it’s only natural, I suppose.”

“What are you talking about all of a sudden?”

Kishiar had been staying in the same accommodation as Yuder, and he had seemed to be convinced from the first time they met that their public claim of being lovers was not genuine. Now, his sudden and unexpected words were incomprehensible.

“While listening to the conversation earlier, I was surprised that the Cavalry, which has not been around for long, could exchange such deep trust.”

Pruelle seemed deeply moved by the conversation she had overheard between Kishiar and Yuder.

“I’ve never tried to trust anyone other than my siblings. I learned that guarding against others is the only way to protect myself. Right? The more trust I give, the more likely my weaknesses are to be exposed.”

“…”

“If I could have been a trusted person like Sir Aile… If I had paid more attention to my family affairs and tried to trust those around me sooner… Could I have prevented my siblings’ danger earlier?”

His last words echoed softly, almost inaudible. Before entering the main residence, Yuder paused for a moment to catch his breath. He had not lived a life worthy of advising others, but he felt he couldn't let Pruelle fall into despair, especially with a big task ahead.

"I actually agree with Master Pruelle's…"

"Elle."

"…Master Elle's words. I had even refused the assistant position several times."

"You refused?"

Pruelle's face showed a startled expression. Yuder nodded in agreement.

"It seems to me that a person who is trusted must first be able to trust. Therefore, it's not me but the Commander who fits Master Elle's words."

Speaking the words out loud felt very strange to him. He never expected to say such a thing about Kishiar La Orr. During his time as Yudrain Aile, such a thing would have been unimaginable.

But he did not think what he had said was wrong. Trust is something that forms through giving and receiving. If Kishiar had not taken all the risks and approached repeatedly despite Yuder's resistance, Yuder would never have thought of reciprocating. The difference was subtle, but the outcome had changed entirely, and continued to change.

"And hasn't Master Elle already trusted the Commander, me, and the Cavalry to come this far? The Commander responded to Master Elle's request. Isn't that trust?"

So, there was no need for unnecessary self-blame. In this life, Pruelle and his siblings were all safe, and nothing bad had happened. That was enough.

“…Sir Aile is right.”

Pruelle replied slowly.

“I said it out of jealousy, but I’ve somehow gained even more shame.”

“If I went too far, I apologize.”

“That’s not it. Just… I feel even more impressed by Duke Peletta.”

A brighter look returned to Pruelle’s dark-red-colored eyes.

“But, if I join the Cavalry, can I call Sir Aile ‘Yuder’?”

As Yuder stepped inside the main residence, he shook his head.

“You can call me whatever you like, so please feel comfortable to address me as you wish.”

“Okay, I will do so.”

From Yuder’s perspective, Pruelle was quite remarkable in his own right. Regardless of having lived without concern for anything beyond his own world, it was exceedingly difficult for someone born a noble to deal so freely and without inhibition with those of different status.

It had been the same during the rebellion of Apeto Family, but it seemed there were more people existing outside the unseen framework than he had known in his previous life.

He couldn’t reverse the fate of those who died or disappeared without a trace. But it seemed not entirely impossible if Kishiar was involved.

This emotion, this belief that felt vividly present even without logic or evidence, might be what people call hope.

“But why is the inside of the main building so noisy?”

Pruelle, with a bright face, suddenly halted and furrowed his brows, turning his head. Beyond the excessively glamorous entrance hall, seemingly designed to overwhelm guests, voices were heard that were unusually loud. What was being said was unclear, but it was definitely human noise.

Pruelle did not proceed to his quarters on the second floor but called over a servant who had appeared in the distance. Upon being asked what was happening, the servant, unable to conceal his fearful expression, cautiously answered.

“During dinner, Lord Fayfe and Lady Nellisabel left their seats as their clothes got wet. After changing, they have not returned, and we do not know where they went. We are all looking for them.”

“I see, understood.”

Pruelle dismissed the servant and suggested moving upstairs with an unhappy face.

“I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s strange. Where could they have gone?”

“They didn’t disappear; they probably just took the carriage they had brought in protest and went back. That couple often acts impulsively and carelessly, despite living off the Baron’s property.

They must have been angry with the Baron for not siding with them and took another carriage home.”

When a guest invited to a noble’s home became angry with the host, leaving while ignoring the host’s hospitality was a sign of aristocratic insult. Pruelle entered his quarters as if there was nothing more to see, and a cat that had been sitting on a soft cushion and closing its eyes let out a tiny cry when it saw him.

Pruelle quickly changed his cold expression, cherishing the cat and stroking its body.

“Nipollen. Have you been waiting for your brother? You must have been scared. I’m sorry for being late.”

“…”

After a while of pampering the cat, Pruelle turned his head as if recognizing Yuder’s gaze and let out a slightly embarrassed smile.

“I always treat him like this when he’s in this state.”

“You don’t have to worry about it.”

Nipollen, who had jumped out of Pruelle’s arms, circled around Yuder a few times and then rubbed its tiny head against his ankle.

“Nipollen certainly seems to like Sir Aile very much.”

“…Did you not say that he acted similarly towards that servant suspected to be an Awakener?”

“That’s true. But the frequency is different. He only approached that person once, but he’s doing it several times with you. I wonder how surprised my siblings will be to know that this guy likes someone so much.”

“…”

“Oh right. I have to call that servant soon.”

Pruelle grinned and pulled a string to call the servant.

“He’ll probably come right away if it’s not a serious matter. Will you watch from a blind spot? Or will you stay here with me?”

“I’ll stay with you.”

Even if that person was simply an Awakener hiding his identity, it was necessary to stay near Pruelle and Nipollen to be prepared for any situation. Protection became more difficult the further one was from the one being protected.

A moment later, a slow footstep was heard from outside the door. Yuder thought that he wouldn’t be surprised, no matter who appeared. But when the door opened with a knock and a man wearing servant’s clothes appeared, that thought was splendidly overturned.

The young man who had just entered as a new servant, astonishingly, was an acquaintance of Yuder. It was the very Awakener who had been there to help rescue a fallen mage and had thrown a sword to Yuder at the last moment when he was trying to lure Pethuamet to defeat it.

It had been a brief moment, but it was an impressive experience, so Yuder recognized him immediately upon seeing his face. As soon as Yuder recognized him, the man’s eyes widened, apparently recognizing Yuder as well.

“…You.”

As soon as Yuder opened his mouth, the man slowly backed away.

“Wait…!”

Before he had even finished speaking, the man turned and started to run away. Without a second glance, Yuder shouted toward Pruelle.

“Is that servant the one?”

“Yes, it is. But why…?”

“It’s an acquaintance. I’ll catch him, so don’t follow and please wait a moment!”

After quickly finishing his words, Yuder immediately took flight. As he went out into the hallway, he caught a glimpse of the man’s retreating figure at the far end of the wide corridor. Normally he would have moved on the wind at such times, but now all he could manage without burden was a slight lift on the tip of his foot. Still, he was able to run at a speed incomparable to the culprit.

The man quickly ran down to the first floor. A few servants who saw Yuder chasing him shouted in confusion, but there was no time to respond.

‘Damn. He’s so fast. I don’t know what ability he has, but…’

The man’s shadow soon headed for the basement below the first floor. Yuder decided to exert himself a bit more before going down an unknown path.

“I told you to stop!”

“Kuk!”

Suppressing a suffocating feeling in his chest, he exerted his power, and the ground quaked and rose up in front of the man’s feet. Tripping, the man fell flat, and Yuder successfully grabbed the back of his neck.

The two tumbled together down the hall and beyond, into the dark basement. Yuder felt sensations of hitting various objects all over his body but strained to hold on to his captive.

After a moment, their rolling bodies came to a stop. Yuder, panting for breath, held tightly to the man's clothing and conjured a small flame.

"Hey there."

"…"

'…Did he faint?'

Whether it was the shock of falling and tumbling, the man was unconscious. Yuder let out a small sigh and loosened the tie around the man's neck, then tied his wrists. Only then did he have a moment to look around, when suddenly his own blood-stained hand caught his eye.

At first, he thought it looked that way in the light of the fire, but it wasn't. It was blood.

'What's this?'

He examined the man he had tied up, but there were no wounds. Yuder increased the flame a bit more.

And then, not far away, he discovered two entwined corpses that had fallen.

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Chapter 361

For a moment, the tips of his fingers stopped twitching. The damp, foul smell that irritated his nose was not merely because the basement was humid. Yuder silently stood up from where the fainted man lay and moved closer to the corpse with agile motions.

The sight reflected under the flickering light was truly horrific. Beneath the torn dress and formal wear, severed limbs were piled like a heap of broken dolls, and pale, cold faces were visible, mouths agape in terror. Though soaked in blood and the hair was tangled, their identities were still recognizable.

They were the second younger brother and his wife of Baron Willhem, who had disappeared without returning after changing their clothes.

‘It looks as though the clothes and bones were all cut simultaneously, and I can feel a terrible rage. This method… it’s almost identical to how the Knights of Tainu were killed in Great Sarain Forest.’

Yuder’s mind briefly recalled the face of the woman who had been beside Nahan before it vanished.

‘Her name was… Ershi, wasn’t it?’

Though the small flicker of light made it hard to confirm, there were almost no bloodstains on the ceiling and walls, and only the floor was sopping wet. Blood was still trickling from the corpses. If they hadn’t been dead long, the murderer might still be nearby.

‘Were they killed somewhere else and then brought here?’

Without caring that the formal wear he wore was getting dirty, Yuder knelt down and examined the corpses a bit more under the light, noticing that their clothes and shoes were already soiled with something other than blood.

‘…Mud? Or some other filth?’

Standing up to look around, he faintly saw a small door beyond the barrels filled with alcohol and preserved food. Yuder carefully moved towards it. The door led to stairs going up, seemingly leading to the garden rather than inside the house. Though he strained his senses, he felt no signs of anyone.

‘This is where the servants bring in supplies… So the fugitive came here as well.’

Yuder didn’t go outside but turned back inside. In such a situation, he couldn’t afford to wait for the fainted man to wake up. As he slapped his cheek without hesitation, the man’s eyelids fluttered open with a faint moan.

“Uh… Uh?!”

The man, upon seeing Yuder, was shocked, struggling with his bound hands. But before he could resist, Yuder quickly grabbed his collar and forcefully lifted him so he could see the corpses. The man’s eyes widened and his mouth gaped at the sight of the blood and bodies illuminated under the flames.

He had intended to silence the man if he screamed, but thankfully he didn’t.

“Baron Willhem’s younger brother and his wife were killed. Did you participate in the murder?”

“What? No!”

“Then why were you sneaking around here?”

Voices were heard from the upper floor. People were about to rush in. The man also sensed it, as his breathing quickened.

“I, I came to find someone.”

“Someone?”

“People from our village who were driven out and disappeared from the security management team’s prison…!”

As Yuder’s eyes widened at his words, a voice from the upper floor shouted, “There they are!” Before he could understand the situation further, people had come down. The servants, armed with weapons and torches, saw Yuder, covered in blood, and the corpses beyond, and all screamed in unison.

“A corpse! Someone has been murdered!”

“Someone fetch the Baron!”

“Don’t move!”

Yuder, looking at the weapons aimed at them, inwardly clicked his tongue. To anyone looking, this was a situation ripe for misunderstanding. It seemed like the conversation was going to end here.

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“…So,”

Kishiar muttered as he exhaled deeply.

“Do you wish to send my assistant to the Security Management Team just because he was the first to discover that place? How is that different from saying you’ll arrest him?”

“Your Highness. My sibling Fayfe and his wife Nellisabel were brutally killed in my own home, in the basement no less!”

Baron Willhem, whose face had turned as pale as a blank sheet of paper, opened his mouth in a sharp voice.

“The examiners assert that cutting a human body in such a way is something that can’t be done by someone with ordinary strength. They said it must be the work of an Awakener, if not a knight skilled in swordsmanship. If two Awakeners were caught at the scene, shouldn’t both of them be sent to the Security Management Team for investigation?”

“Just because you want to send your servant to the Security Management Team there is no reason for my assistant to follow him. The priority right to investigate and punish the Cavalry members lies with me, the Commander, and His Majesty. I have no intention of sending anyone under my command there.”

“But…!”

“If an investigation is necessary, isn’t it possible to call those who will conduct it to the mansion? I’m more than willing to cooperate with that.”

“Your Highness. Please understand that the more you shield him, the more complicated matters will become!”

Finally, Baron Willhem raised his voice. Yuder sat behind Kishiar, still unable to remove his blood-stiffened formal attire, and let out a small breath. A throbbing headache settled in from the prolonged confrontation.

After the bodies of Baron Willhem’s brother and sister-in-law were discovered, the mansion was turned upside down. Yuder was arrested along with another man and immediately isolated in a room. The Baron wanted to send both of them to the Security Management

Team right away. The only reason he couldn't send Yuder was thanks to Kishiar and Pruelle, who had rushed over as soon as they heard the news. However, that very action had led to the current situation, and it was not all fortunate.

Yuder calmly assessed the situation. It was a rather aristocratic and absurd affair, but the Baron, while nauseated by the gruesome corpses, seemed not to grieve for the fact that his brother and sister-in-law were dead. The reason he hounded Yuder was not that he believed Yuder was the real culprit, but more likely because he wanted to gain something from Kishiar by doing so.

'If he can catch the culprit here, he can get the cooperation of the Cavalry for free, and stand above Duke Peletta, reversing everything he has suffered so far.'

Of course, he probably thought the real culprit was the servant, so he would likely try to kill him quickly without proper investigation or anything else. Yuder envisioned him torturing the man to extract a confession, since an escape by the Awakener's power would be troublesome.

'But that man is certainly not the culprit.'

Yuder had only exchanged the last few words with the man, and the only thing he remembered was the face he had seen during the Pethuamet lure operation, but his experience and intuition strongly insisted that the man had no connection to the culprit.

The only people who could have come this far in search of those who had been expelled from the Awakener village were the moderate Awakeners who might have been in that village. Since they would be opposed to Nahan, who were allied with Ershi, the possibility of them being involved with the murdered bodies in Ershi's style was low. Although Marty, who was expelled and lost memory but recovered, said that even the moderate Awakeners might have betrayed them, could that really be the case?

‘I should have heard more information from that man.’

No matter how much he thought about it, it was terribly regrettable.

‘How should I meet him again before the Baron kills him? To get him out as quickly as possible without delay…’

Yuder hesitated for a moment, glancing sideways at Baron Willhem, who was still raising his voice. Following Kishiar’s words, he was loudly proclaiming that the knights assigned to investigate would be summoned here, and they must cooperate when they arrived.

“I trust you will not forget your promise to cooperate if we summon the knights here for investigation.”

“If the investigation is conducted properly, why would there be any reason to forget?”

At Kishiar’s sarcastically gentle retort, the Baron wrinkled his nose indiscriminately and called for the butler who was outside the door.

“Where is Sir Jeymer, the Commander of the Knights, now?”

“Since you ordered it yesterday, my lord, he has been guarding the front of Lord Graham’s house, but I heard he will soon return to the Security Management Team for this investigation.”

“That’s enough now. Leave Graham and the security management team to others and tell him to come here immediately!”

“Yes? But…”

“Hurry!”

Under the Baron's spirited and angry pressure, the butler replied that he understood and quickly disappeared.

"The knights are guarding your brother? It wasn't just a simple illness then?"

"…Lately, there have been frequent accidents around Graham's house, and I was worried, so I asked the Commander of the Knights to take care of it."

"Really? The Knight Commander doing such a thing, you must be close."

At Kishiar's response, Baron Willhem once again clenched his teeth and then eased his pressure.

"Lately, the situation in Tainu has become quite chaotic, so it was inevitable. Of course, Your Highness might not have paid attention to the outside situation since you are here."

"That's right. I've been busy playing with my assistant here."

When Kishiar answered, neither ashamed nor afraid, Baron Willhem was momentarily at a loss for words and then burst out laughing.

At that moment, a rather good idea popped into Yuder's head.

'Right. If I want to meet him, isn't it a matter of me going to him?'

"Sorry to interrupt your conversation, but may I also say something?"

Yuder quickly interjected, opening his mouth before Baron Willhem could say anything else.

"I don't mind just going to the Security Management Team for the investigation."

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“…What?”

“…”

The sharp contrast between Baron Willhem, who asked in disbelief even though he had received the answer he had hoped for, and Kishiar, who collected his smile as though he were trying to gauge Yuder’s intentions, was clear.

“Didn’t I explicitly tell you to keep your mouth shut? Now, believing His Grace the Duke is by your side, you speak very recklessly!”

When confining Yuder, Baron Willhem had refrained from binding him, instead laying down a stern warning that opening his mouth or using his powers would be taken as a confession. He had wanted to use Yuder as a card to get what he desired, but he didn’t want to provoke unnecessary anger by mishandling him. Thus far, he had sat quietly behind Kishiar, but not out of fear of the Baron’s threats.

“Why would I? I simply thought that while listening to your conversation, following your instructions for a fair investigation would better prove my innocence. Hence, I took the liberty to request permission to speak.”

Of course, Baron Willhem had never used the word “fair.” However, Yuder chattered on, his face like iron, as though it were self-evident.

“Didn’t you just mention the opinions of those who have examined the case? I agree with them. Even when I saw the deceased, I thought it was clearly not the act of a commoner.”

“Tha…”

Before the Baron could speak, Yuder quickly continued.

“If it is a crime committed by an Awakener, how could our Cavalry be left out? We couldn’t help directly when Tainu’s Knights were killed in the Great Sarain Forest, but this time will be different. I will cooperate fully with the investigation and do my best to catch the real culprit.”

“Wha, what are you talking about? The real culprit?”

“…Do you think the servant caught by the assistant is not the criminal?”

Kishiar quietly interrupted the Baron’s words and asked. Yuder nodded his head.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he said he didn’t do it.”

“You expect me to believe such nonsense now… Do you think this situation is a joke? In fact, you and the Awakener who disguised himself as my servant were in collusion! That’s what you’re confessing now!”

Regardless of the Baron’s shouting, Yuder focused solely on Kishiar’s reaction.

Since his capture at the scene and until now, Yuder had not had a chance to talk privately with Kishiar or the others. Kishiar, who had rushed here upon hearing the news and had been fending off Baron Willhem, would not have a clear understanding of the situation beyond what the Baron had told him.

The Baron had already admitted that an Awakener was definitely the criminal. He might have wanted to pin the crime on Yuder, but since the crime was related to an Awakener, the Cavalry had priority in the investigation.

The Baron may have found them infinitely ridiculous, looking as if they knew nothing and did nothing, but in reality, Kishiar and the Cavalry had no reason to bow to him on this occasion. As long as they did not retreat from protecting Yuder.

‘We need to find out why, how the Star of Nagran has done such a thing. There might be someone there worth saving for information. We don’t have time to be doing this because of Baron Willhem’s petty power struggles.’

Yuder looked straight into Kishiar’s eyes. He couldn’t say it directly, but he believed that Kishiar would understand his intention to this extent.

“Commander. Please allow me to go to the security management team.”

“…”

If Yuder remained here for the investigation, the chances of saving the man would be infinitely low. But if he stepped forward to be investigated first, the story would be different. After all, the Baron didn’t truly want Yuder’s innocence to be revealed. His insistence on sending Yuder to the public safety team was merely to hold onto Kishiar, not out of sincerity.

In the end, it was all a hidden struggle among those wearing masks to hide what they really wanted.

In this situation, the best way for Kishiar to proudly stand with the Cavalry without being caught by Baron Willhem was on this side. If

he could meet the captured man along the way, all the better. That's what Yuder thought.

The met red eyes blinked a few times, seemingly wanting to say something, then narrowed, and repeated this pattern until finally disappearing beneath the eyelids with a sigh.

"Commander."

"… Must we do it this way?"

The question returned, laden with many meanings. Rarely was there a voice that did not feel firm, small and fragile. Despite momentarily feeling certain that his judgment was right, a ripple emerged from somewhere deep within his heart, but Yuder slowly nodded.

A moment later, Kishiar opened his eyes. He stood up, looking down at Baron Willhem, his face not that of a wayward Duke but of a composed Commander. Before the Baron could even react to the sudden change in atmosphere, a voice containing immense power struck his head like a cold stream of water.

"I will send Assistant Yuder Aile for a fair investigation to the public safety team as you say. You surely know how much of a concession this is?"

"… Yes?"

"Since we have confirmed that the circumstances of the case are closely related to the Awakener, from now on, the Cavalry will participate in all investigations."

"… No, Your Highness. Please wait."

"Let us restart with the on-site investigation. If the real culprit is elsewhere, there's no time for this."

“Your, Your Highness!”

“Inform Commander Jeymer Phil of Tainu’s Knights. Tell him to go back to the public safety team, not here.”

Kishiar pulled Yuder up by his shoulder.

“For Yuder Aile’s investigation, the Cavalry will send Deputy Commander Ever Beck, Emun Philang, and Finn Eldore together. All investigations will be conducted under the cooperation of the Tainu Knights and the Cavalry, and opinions regarding the Awakener will prioritize the judgment of the Cavalry. Anyone refusing will be judged as defying the imperial order.”

The Baron, stunned by the sentence pronounced like a verdict, only came to his senses and stood up after they had left.

“What exactly… What are you saying, Your Highness! Wait, please.”

It was a moment when the opponents he thought he had completely understood, the flag of victory he thought he had seized, suddenly seemed far away.

“You will know who did it as soon as you see the corpse.”

Yuder whispered quickly and quietly, hearing Baron Willhem’s pursuing footsteps from behind.

“I don’t know how they came and went, but ‘why’ they did it is more important, I think.”

“Why.”

Kishiar muttered, following Yuder’s words.

“That part cannot be understood by investigating from one side only. I will find out in that place myself.”

“They said they found nine body parts according to Pruelle’s words.”

“He came to find those who lost their memories. So, that part as well, please…”

“Your Highness!”

Yuder closed his mouth, hearing Baron Willhem’s footsteps approaching.

“I beg you. I will be back shortly.”

Kishiar sighed and bowed his head. Yuder did not avoid the descending lips but accepted them.

“…I brought you here to rest, but who would have known that the place to rest would turn into a prison?”

A faint whisper came through the falling kiss.

“I wanted to change your clothes and send you off, but my heart hurts.”

“I’m fine.”

“I knew you would say that, so it hurts.”

When he glanced to the side, Baron Willhem was standing frozen, his mouth agape. Yuder nonchalantly brushed past him and went down.

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“Investigate this person too? For that murder case? But the criminal has already been captured…”

“Be quiet. Anyway, Commander Phil has not arrived yet…”

The Knights who greeted Yuder, who had come to Baron Willhem's residence with the security management team, were all wearing expressions of incomprehension. From their perspective, it was bewildering to suddenly have another suspect added when the criminal had already been caught.

But those who remembered that the suspect was the very same arrogant Cavalry member who had come to the security management team with the Duke of Peletta not long ago tried to intimidate Yuder with loud laughter.

"The hero of the West, saved the Great Sarain Forest, but the Cavalry is nothing special."

"Maybe the real criminal is that guy, and he was caught trying to pin it on a servant. I thought it was suspicious when he was acting arrogant here, using his abilities."

"What did you say just now?"

As Ever, who had come here with Yuder, coldly retorted, the Knights promptly closed their mouths. But a low chuckling continued.

"I'm so annoyed, I'll go and beat them up."

"You don't need to, Finn."

Yuder calmly stopped Finn, who was about to ball up his fists.

"Anyway, the investigation will start with you after the Knight Commander arrives. Until then, they can only do that."

"But still."

"Cleaning up the trash is done in proper order after the work is finished."

"Damn."

Emun, who had been silent with an angry expression, seemed to have trouble holding back laughter and blinked his eyes.

"…Yuder, how can you say that in this situation?"

Ever frowned, bewildered, but her tone was much calmer. Thinking that she needed to maintain composure for the investigation, Yuder was led to his feet by the soldiers who had come to escort him.

"I'll be back then, please take care of the investigation."

"…It's my first time doing this, so I'm worried, but we have to do well for Yuder to come out quickly. I'll do my best."

For the joint investigation, some conversation between the Knight Commander and the Cavalry was needed, so Yuder was planning to wait in the prison for a while. And that was exactly where Yuder had intended to go.

'Usually, related persons in the same case are put in the same area.'

After following the dark stairs for some time and entering through the open door, the prisoner, crouched with one iron bar between them, flinched and looked up. The Awakener man, whose face had been severely injured in just a few hours, looked up at Yuder as if he couldn't believe it.

"You…?"

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Yuder raised his finger to his lips before the man could raise his voice any further, gesturing for him to be quiet. The man, who had become aware of the soldiers near the prison where they were trapped, promptly closed his mouth.

Looking back at his previous experience, the Tainu Security Management prison was not heavily guarded in proportion to its size. Even without that, this was a time when manpower was even more lacking. If they had behaved, those guards would soon have lowered their defenses and moved elsewhere.

Yuder quietly sat in the darkness that shrouded the prison, maintaining silence. As he expected, the soldiers watching them outside the prison soon judged that there was no problem, telling them to stay put before they turned away.

“…Finally, we can have a proper conversation.”

“What the hell happened? Why are you here…”

The man, seeming to have been waiting, raised his head and asked in a feeble voice.

“I came for investigation, just like you. Well, that’s not important. I’m glad you didn’t cause a disturbance or try to escape here. It would have been difficult for us to talk if you had.”

The biggest worry on the way here had been that part, but fortunately, the man had obediently stayed in the prison so far. Upon hearing Yuder’s words, the man coldly let out a “Ha, what are you talking about?”

“I don’t use my abilities to kill or attack people like others. My ability isn’t even suitable for that. If I tried to escape, I would die before leaving this place. Why would I seek a swift death?”

“Quick judgment is good. Then first, tell me who you are and what you know about today’s incident.”

“Why should I?”

“Because both you and I have to prove that we’re not the culprits and catch the real culprit.”

The man’s dark brown eyes hesitated for a moment.

“…You believe I didn’t kill?”

“That’s why I came here.”

“You’re… from the Cavalry.”

“So what?”

The man was silent for a moment before speaking again.

“It’s strange to hear that the person who came to catch me believes in me. If I die, it would be a favorable situation for you. Why would you ask me to speak?”

Time was running out, and the man was annoyingly stubborn. Yuder sighed heavily and opened his mouth towards the man.

“If things stay as they are, you will die. If it were better for you to die, I would have finished you off before I even opened my mouth.”

Whether he felt the truth in Yuder’s emotionless tone, the man’s body stiffened.

“I tried to catch you because I knew there was an Awakener who had infiltrated the Baron’s house. If you hadn’t run and had obediently told your purpose, the situation that could have ended quickly was complicated by you. I already know that the real culprit is related to Nahan, and I need the rest of the information. You’re on the other side from him, aren’t you?”

“…How do you know that?”

“The ones you’re looking for are protected by the Cavalry in the mansion. I thought you came there to rescue them, but was I wrong?”

For a moment, the man’s eyes changed. Despair and resignation filled the darkness, and suddenly, a heated emotion burst forth. The man straightened his crouched body and clung to the iron bars.

“So, they were there after all. They were alive…! It, it’s not a lie, is it?”

“Why should I lie? You can confirm it yourself as soon as you leave here.”

“Are they all safe… No, are they safe? How on earth……”

At that time, the distant noise of soldiers was heard, as if they had picked up on some commotion. Yuder signaled with his eyes once again, a gesture for silence. The man held his breath, his hand gripping the iron bars. Only after the noise had vanished did the conversation resume.

Yuder briefly explained the process of finding the people who had lost their memories and the subsequent treatment. Upon hearing that some had regained consciousness through the care of the Priest and Cavalry members, the man bit his lip tightly.

“They were driven mad… some of them are already dead,” he stammered.

“It’s unfortunate, but there was nothing we could do. It happened before we found them.”

“Then was there, by any chance, a woman with long hair like the rainy sky there? Her name is Marty… she’s from Nelarn…”

The man couldn’t finish his sentence, bowing his head while tightly gripping the iron bars. Yuder was momentarily surprised by the unexpected name, but he calmly answered.

“She is with us. She was the first to regain consciousness.”

“…By God.”

Strength drained from the hand that had been gripping the bars as if to shatter them. The man knelt before Yuder, repeatedly expressing his gratitude, his shoulders heaving. Despite the lack of time, Yuder didn’t reproach him for his sobbing, pretending not to notice. A moment later, the man, his tears dried, asked more carefully, his attitude much gentler than before.

“Did Marty… happen to mention me? I am Marty’s…”

“She mentioned having a lover in the village.”

“I see.”

The man quickly raised his head in response. His face was battered and swollen, but his eyes were clearer than before.

“You are right. I am part of the Star of Nagran, and have long severed ties with those who follow Nahan. I thought that even if I died, as long as I could find Marty, I could grasp at a final hope, so I went there.”

Determination flowed over his face, hidden in shadows.

“If I trust you, can I leave here alive? Can I meet Marty again?”

Yuder reached his hand into the iron bars towards him.

“I promise, in the name of Yuder Aile, assistant to the Cavalry Commander.”

“I will believe you. My name is Robel Gemson.”

Robel slowly reached out and shook hands, then let go. He revealed that he was from the west and had coincidentally joined the Star of Nagran after awakening, then informed Yuder of his ability.

“I have the ability to lighten weight.”

“So that’s why you could escape so quickly.”

“Well, yes. It works on objects too. It’s nothing special, though.”

Robel, having exposed his information, seemed to try to lighten the mood, offering a faint smile on his bruised face.

“It’s not an insignificant ability. Depending on how it’s developed, it can become terrifying. You only think it’s not special.”

“…No one ever said that to me before. They all said it was a silly ability.”

“If you hadn’t used that ability to return my sword, I wouldn’t have been able to kill the monster. It’s not a silly thing at all.”

“That is… true.”

Robel seemed to awkwardly agree, still clearly remembering when he had met Yuder while defeating Pethuamet.

“I didn’t think you would remember me.”

How could Yuder not remember those who had helped in a crisis? Moreover, at that time, Robel and his companions had risked their lives to protect the village in the forest, even rescuing unknown mages. Even in such an urgent situation, it could not have been an easy decision.

“At that moment, I saw your figure… I must say now, it was really extraordinary. I thought you were not like me. Because I saw that, I quickly accepted Nahan’s moving decision. If someone with such power listens to us, it would be fortunate, but if not… it would become a natural disaster worse than monsters. I chose it for safety.”

It seemed like a way of saying that everything that had happened was all his fault, but Robel shook his head as if that wasn’t what he meant.

“I regret it. I should have watched what that man’s secret plan was and made a more cautious decision…”

Regretting it won’t change what’s already happened. Yuder said nothing. Instead, he changed the subject and asked a substantive question.

“Do you have any clues as to why they came all the way to Baron Willhem’s house and left the corpses?”

“…Actually, I’ve been feeling a bad vibe from the surroundings since yesterday.”

Robel answered, lost in thought.

“Before infiltrating this place, I asked my colleagues to keep my whereabouts a secret from Nahan’s side. Then, after becoming a

servant, I communicated with them once a day at a designated place. But yesterday… there was no contact from my colleagues.”

Robel had guessed that his colleagues were busy or perhaps prevented by some other matter, and so he had returned to Baron Willhem’s house. However, after returning, he said he couldn’t shake off the ominous premonition.

“While doing servant’s work, I learned the structure of Baron Willhem’s mansion to some extent, and I also found out the escape route in case of an emergency. I didn’t inform all of my colleagues, but…”

“You’re thinking that information might have leaked to Nahan’s side.”

“…Yes.”

“Even so, why the Baron’s younger sibling and spouse, and why today?”

“I’m not sure… but the people I know don’t particularly make elaborate plans and move accordingly. Perhaps, they were loitering around the mansion’s surroundings at an opportune moment, and the couple caught their eye.”

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Robel seemed to feel that the siblings of the Baron had become the targets, but there didn't appear to be a specific reason for the murder that occurred today.

"I believe the main intent was to show an example that the mansion's security was breached, to disgrace the Baron and the Tain family. If that's not the case, then…"

"Then what?"

"If they knew that the Cavalry was staying at the Baron's mansion, they might have wanted to sow discord. In the meantime, they could do whatever they wanted. They were capable enough to do just that."

Though his words were mixed with strong personal emotion, they were not overly absurd.

'Utilizing a method to identify the culprit as an Awakener, they might have intended to cause confusion between the Tain family and the Cavalry… The possibility was there. More precisely, they probably aimed to hinder the Cavalry.'

Nahan had already met Yuder and Kishiar in the Great Sarain Forest. If Nathan Zuckerman, who sensed something odd during the visit to the Red Deer Consortium building and missed something, was right, the probability that Nahan already knew where the Cavalry members were was high. It wasn't exactly a secret that the Cavalry was staying at Baron Willhem's mansion, even though it wasn't widely known.

'Through the conversation we had when we met in the Great Sarain Forest, he knew Kishiar was interested in Tain family's illegal

trade business… Was this a preemptive strike at this point?’

It was something he might have done. Of course, he probably didn’t anticipate that Yuder would discover Robel and both would end up in prison following a chase.

‘But something still feels missing.’

A sensation he felt when he saw the corpse. The fog-like doubt he felt while Baron Willhem and Kishiar were talking remained unresolved, still vague.

‘What could it be? What am I missing right now? …Will I be able to find out more from Kishiar’s information?’

As Yuder remained silent and lost in thought, Robel continued his story. He spoke of the two initial explosion incidents in Tainu, revealing that while they had infiltrated the Red Deer Consortium building, the actual invasion was done by himself and his colleagues. He wore a sullen expression as he spoke.

“We were planning to secretly rescue Marty and others there while Nahan’s guys were in another… But nobody was there. Now that I think about it, it feels like I got tangled up with Nahan somehow.”

He seemed to carry significant guilt at the fact that soldiers were injured in the explosion caused by his colleague while fleeing. Since he never attacked or killed anyone and just wanted to live quietly, it was understandable.

Yuder shifted the subject before Robel’s eyes could darken further.

“Regarding Nahan’s side attacking the Red Deer Consortium building, do you recall anything else? Anything at all will do.”

“Um… To be exact, it was actually a person named Ershi who led that. Nahan was just helping under the pretext of aiding her revenge. I heard Nahan helped because Ershi targeted the place.”

“I’ve encountered that person before.”

“Ah. Then, by any chance… Were you the Cavalry member who almost cut off Nahan’s arm?”

Yuder shook his head.

“I didn’t do that. But… his arm was almost cut off?”

He had thought that Nahan must have been quite injured since Kishiar had intervened and there was a lot of blood, but he did not know he had inflicted such a major wound on Nahan.

“He said he was seriously injured while protecting Ershi. It’s a little surprising and disappointing that it wasn’t you. Anyway, Ershi had targeted the Red Deer Consortium building and went there with Nahan and a few others. They brought back many bundles of paper. Nahan examined them for a while. I don’t know what happened after, since I had a big argument and left the place when he almost finished reading them.”

The fact that Nahan’s side had robbed the secret vault of the Red Deer Consortium, which had been speculated, was now revealed to be true. What content did those documents hold? Perhaps the actions that Ershi and Nahan were undertaking now were related to them. Yuder memorized this information well.

“There’s nothing else I can think of for now. I’ll tell you if I remember anything else.”

Robel was extremely cooperative. Perhaps it was because something more precious than his life was at stake, he was more

unreserved in speaking than even the Gayle and Doyle brothers within the Cavalry.

‘They seemed disheveled but always kept their mouths shut about the group’s secrets or the sage. What if I ask Robel?’

Although it could be a good opportunity to find out about the sage, urgent matters were at hand, so that part was postponed for now.

“Over there! Commander Phil has arrived, so be on your feet. He will come up for investigation as soon as the conversation with the Cavalry is over.”

A soldier shouted from beyond the dark prison bars. It seemed that the time for the investigation had finally come. Robel was startled and then nervously swallowed his dry saliva.

“… What should I do during the investigation?”

“You didn’t make any false confessions before I came, did you?”

“I didn’t. If I had, I wouldn’t be in this state. Of course, they seemed to have already marked me as guilty, regardless of what I said.”

“That’ll do. I knew you were an Awakener and tried to arrest you as an intruder, and you were only startled by the sudden situation and stumbled while fleeing. Finding the body was a coincidence, and none of us killed them. Just remember that fact. No need to say anything else.”

“…Strangely, that’s not a lie at all.”

Relieved, Robel moved his battered face with difficulty and smiled.

Soon, soldiers came to fetch them. Yuder further examined the prison structure as he came out. Although it was a more monotonous structure than other prisons he had been in, it was certainly robust.

“To see you again like this.”

Knight Commander Jeymer Phil said with a scowl as he saw Yuder again. Yuder ignored him and examined the faces of Ever and his colleagues beside her. There was an extra face that wasn’t there before. Pruelle Van Taine was sitting next to the Knight Commander and faintly smiled as he saw Yuder.

“Oh, assistant Aile. I couldn’t stand still, feeling sorry for having you go through this trouble while visiting my cat. I decided to help with the investigation by conveying what I remember.”

“…So you have.”

Yuder suspected that Kishiar had sent him but silently nodded his head. In the solemn atmosphere, the Knight Commander stood up and gave an order.

“Seat them.”

The soldiers tried to make Robel and Yuder kneel. Robel complied obediently, but Yuder did not.

“Is it the rule of the Tainu Knight to treat those who came for the investigation as criminals? Or do you lack chairs?”

At his retort, confusion and incredulity fluttered over the faces of the Knights standing around.

“Yuder is right. The Commander only said that Yuder was sent for cooperation in the investigation. Such treatment from the start is unpleasant.”

“Ha, it’s outrageous.”

Ever, with a cold face, sent support, and Jeymer Phil finally ordered a chair to be brought. That alone caused the tense atmosphere to ease in an instant.

The investigation was much more chaotic than Yuder had anticipated. Jeymer Phil and the Tainu Knights insisted that either Yuder or Robel could be the perpetrator since the criminal was an Awakener, but they were unable to present any evidence or logical reasoning. On the other hand, Yuder had witnesses from the Cavalry, able to describe the ability that killed Baron Willhem’s sibling and spouse, and what Yuder had been doing that day.

“I went up to the room with Sir Aile, to meet the cat at my request after the meal. He was with me all the time until he saw the servant and ran off,” Pruelle said, taking a relaxed seat. Jeymer Phil, who had been continuously pressing Yuder and Robel, clamped his mouth shut.

“And before I came here, I heard from Duke Peletta that it’s certain the Fayfe and Nellisabel couple were murdered outside the mansion and then moved to the basement. Bloodstained mud on their clothes and shoes was found outside, you know.”

Yuder realized that Pruelle’s words were information being conveyed to him by Kishiar. Pruelle met his gaze and faintly nodded as if confirming his thoughts.

Commander Jeymer Phil inquired among his subordinate Knights if the words were true, but the response was that they were unable to confirm as communication with the Knights at the mansion was not smooth.

“Then, since both this servant and I were inside the mansion all along, we cannot be the culprits.”

After hearing the coordinated statements from Yuder and Robel, the Knight Commander's face turned sour. Everyone was complicating the matter, which would have been easier if they could simply pin the blame on Yuder or Robel. It was enough to make him angry.

"Duke Peletta and the Cavalry have conveyed that the real culprits are those who killed the Tainu Knights in the Great Sarain Forest, but frankly, it's hard to believe that those bastards came in, killed people, and left without doing anything else. The joint investigation continues, so we'll reconvene for a second inquiry in a day."

In the end, the investigation concluded without any clear resolution. Before Yuder was returned to prison, Emun covertly handed him something while pretending to greet him.

"The Commander sent this. Take it."

"…"

Yuder felt something inside the small cloth bag. He hid it in his formal sleeve.

"Are you not scared of the prison?"

"I'm fine."

"What about the cold? The floor is bare there."

"That's fine too."

Yuder's colleagues sighed at his response, patting his shoulder.

"Don't ever endure if someone says something. It won't be a problem for you."

"I plan on it."

Yuder was taken back to the prison. After the soldiers were gone, he opened the bag and found a small bottle of holy water, effective for wound healing, and a red heating stone that briefly aided in maintaining body temperature.

"…"

Until that moment, he had been perfectly fine, but seeing those items made him feel oddly moved.

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Chapter 365

‘When did he manage to obtain these?’

They had not left the mansion for more than a few hours. The heating stones were expensive, and the duration they could maintain warmth was disappointingly short for their price. Kishiar had no concern about money, of course, but the thought that he had ordered these for Yuder even when he was insanely busy naturally led to a sigh.

‘There’s no need for this.’

Everyone was paying so much attention to him, even though they knew he would leave as soon as the investigation was over tomorrow, if nothing else came up. In the past, he had been a bit confused about how to respond whenever things happened that had never happened before, as if they were natural.

“Robel.”

Yuder put the heating stones that Kishiar had sent into his pocket and handed them to Robel through the window bars. Since he was not injured, it seemed better for the injured to use them.

“Apply them to your face sparingly to avoid arousing suspicion, and use the rest on your body.”

“Such a valuable thing… Isn’t it something you secretly brought from the Cavalry? I can’t use it.”

“You never know what might happen, and if there’s an injured person next to me, it will be hard on both of us.”

“But still…”

Despite his explanation, Robel hesitated several times under Yuder's gaze, but eventually, he carefully used the holy water. His face was covered in wounds, but the parts hidden by his clothing were so messy that it made Yuder involuntarily frown.

"Did they beat you to make you confess?"

"Well… at least I wasn't tortured. When I think about Marty and the others who were trapped here longer and suffered more, this is nothing. If I think about Marty, I… even if I die, I have no complaints."

Thanks to the effective holy water, Robel's body became visibly clean before long. He thanked Yuder formally and then hesitated several times as if he wanted to say something but turned his gaze away each time.

"If you have something to say, say it."

"It's just… now that I know Marty is alive, I'm so curious… I heard she regained her memory; is she doing well? How's her health? Is she eating well… Can I hear even just a little?"

Yuder had suspected it, but Robel indeed seemed curious about his lover's wellbeing. Despite his best efforts to suppress it, the desperate look in his eyes made Yuder feel a strange sense of deja vu.

A certain desperate gaze filled with bitterness.

'That sometimes gaze upon me…'

"…it's probably difficult, isn't it? I apologize."

Yuder suddenly came to his senses from his absent-minded reverie.

'…What was that?'

“No, she was… doing well. But there’s something I want to tell you; it seems like she’s misunderstanding something about you.”

“Misunderstanding?”

Yuder told Robel the story he heard from Marty. Marty seemed to resent and suspect that Robel and the other moderate Awakeners had betrayed and abandoned her. Upon hearing this, Robel covered his face in shock, silent for a moment, but then he calmed down and spoke.

“It’s understandable that she would think that way. Even if something happened to me, she wouldn’t know… Now that I think about it, it wouldn’t be strange if she felt disillusioned with all the Awakeners after going through that… I was just happy to know we found her.”

“She was friendly with us, and her hatred for Nahan’s side seemed greater, so it probably won’t be that bad. Talk to her when you meet.”

“…Yes.”

Robel said that he had coincidentally left their temporary residence with a few colleagues on an urgent mission before the event that drove the non-Awakeners away. Perhaps the other side had plotted it.

Yuder recalled the words that Kishiar had spoken before. Nahan would not feel anything for those who were originally friendly to the Awakeners and even committed such merciless acts against them. What was it that he desired at the end of his hatred? Was it to complete a world filled only with Awakeners, after all revenge was exacted?

‘I remember what Enon said. He said that among the ancient mages, there were those who acted in such a way.’

A plant that kills the roots of other plants as it grows will not die just by being left alone. The easiest way to kill it was to pluck it out while the sprout was still small.

‘Certainly… Seeing the increasingly reckless actions day by day, I cannot leave it to grow any larger.’

Yuder decided to hope that, as Kishiar wished, he could pluck both the Tain Duke and Nahan through this matter.

As night deepened, a sound like a beast howling came from not far away. It was an eerie sound, as if the wind was blowing fiercely, and yet not.

“Ugh, it’s that annoying noise again. It sends shivers down my spine every time I hear it.”

“It’s been nearly a thousand years since the prison was built, so the wind leaking through and making that noise can’t be helped.”

“But it’s gotten worse lately, hasn’t it? It wasn’t that bad before. We need to find where it’s leaking from, but we’re short of people…”

As the grumbling soldiers passed by and disappeared into the distance, Yuder and Robel kept silent, their lips sealed.

‘Come to think of it, we’re on the third underground floor, and there are no windows. Are there many places where the wind can leak in?’

The place where they had rescued the memory-lost individuals was on the first underground floor, but Yuder and Robel had been confined to the third floor, considering the importance of the matter. It was good that it was very quiet, perhaps because there were almost no others confined on the same floor, but it was a bit inconvenient that there were no windows to gauge the passage of time. Even so,

Yuder thought it wasn’t much different from his own room, as the body was comfortable and there was no one to disturb him.

‘There was a part in the book that Prince Pruelle gave me that mentioned rumors of a fourth underground floor here. Could that be true?’

Pruelle had noted the security management team’s prison as a place to hide ‘items’ related to the Tain Duke’s secret trade. If the existence of the fourth floor were true, now might be the time to verify it.

‘I hardly see any soldiers around here… It probably won’t be a big problem if I slip out for a moment and then return.’

The bars he casually tested were very solid, but they were only iron. Although his power had diminished, he could still easily get out if he wanted to.

Yuder, after a moment’s thought, decided to sneak out and visit the fourth floor once things had quietened down a bit more. Robel, unaware of what Yuder was thinking, repeatedly nodded off and woke up, worn out by the cold and sleepiness. He looked as if he could not sleep because the other person was awake. Seeing the obvious sign, Yuder sighed and suggested that he sleep.

“If you’re tired, just lie down and sleep.”

“Oh… Are you not tired, sir?”

“I’m comfortable like this.”

“You’re truly amazing…”

Robel looked at Yuder as if he were not the same human being. He tried to hold out a little longer but soon leaned against the wall and began to snore quietly. Yuder, not yet asleep, closed his eyes

and checked the movements of the patrolling soldiers from afar. When he thought that they had almost disappeared and it was time to move, he felt the sound of someone coming down the stairs toward the second floor.

“The soldiers patrolling should not have returned yet. What’s going on?”

Yuder continued to keep his eyes closed without reacting. The sound of approaching footsteps, coming directly toward where he was, stopped momentarily in front of him.

Huff.

The moment a very soft breath from the other person reached his ears, a tingling shiver ran down his spine from the back of his neck. The cold blood that had been chilling his entire body surged hotly, as if being pumped in reverse.

Yuder’s eyes flashed open, and he saw Kishiar holding a small lamp.

“…”

He opened his mouth, but he couldn’t figure out what to say. He couldn’t immediately discern whether Kishiar being there was a dream or reality. The man, who had been looking down at Yuder, gracefully knelt and placed the lamp beside him. Only after the unique fragrance spread and their eyes met at the same level did Yuder finally become convinced that this was not a dream.

“… How on earth did you get here?”

With a very soft voice, his lips, which had been mindlessly straight, finally lifted slightly.

“I paid the appropriate price.”

“I will be out tomorrow, why…”

“Uh… Stop saying such harsh words. Can’t you come this way? I can’t see your face well.”

Yuder bit his lip lightly and released it. Slowly approaching the window bars, Kishiar reached out towards him. The warmth that caressed his cheek felt hot, as if it would scald.

‘No. Is it that I have become cold?’

“Where is the heating stone I gave you?”

Kishiar seemed to have the same thought and asked. When Yuder took out the heating stone he had kept in his pocket, Kishiar slightly gripped it. The red light flowed, and the warmth felt even stronger.

“Did you infuse it with magic?”

“It’s no problem to this extent.”

A man who seemed to know what Yuder wanted to say returned the stone. There were not many words exchanged, nor changes in expression, but each small expression or touch felt piercing to the skin.

Only when the cheek that had absorbed the warmth became a little warmer did Kishiar finally release his hand from Yuder’s face and deeply exhale.

“…You’re too cold. I should have at least changed your clothes.”

“I am fine.”

“Have you eaten anything? You barely touched the food at the Baron’s wedding anniversary dinner.”

Had he been watching all that time? Yuder was not particularly hungry, but the soldiers had given him water and bread in between. Kishiar, hearing the answer, seemed somewhat relieved and took something out of his pocket. It was a small folded cloak.

“Wear this. It has a magic spell to retain warmth.”

“The soldiers will notice it tomorrow.”

“It will become invisible to those paid eyes, so don’t worry.”

“…”

Seeing that there was no intention to listen even if he refused, Yuder silently took the cloak handed over through the window bars and wrapped it over his shoulders.

“But… Did you come alone?”

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Chapter 366

“Nathan is waiting outside. Why? Do you want to see Nathan’s face?”

“No, I don’t.”

Yuder immediately shook his head. The faint smile on Kishiar’s face deepened a bit. His gaze turned to Robel, who was sleeping soundly, oblivious to anyone’s presence.

“Is that the person sleeping over there Robel, who sneaked in as a servant?”

“Yes.”

“When we asked those who had lost their memories after the investigation was over, there was someone who knew him.”

“Could that person be a woman named Marty?”

At Yuder’s question, Kishiar nodded in agreement.

“Yes.”

“I’ve also heard a bit more about that part here.”

Yuder quickly finished his report, summarizing the fact that Robel had promised to cooperate for Marty, as well as the assumptions he had made based on the information he had heard from him.

“Contrary to his speculation, I think there might be another motive behind this murder. However… I still don’t know exactly what it is.”

“I can see that my assistant has been working non-stop even while he’s here.”

With a strange expression, Kishiar let out a short laugh and soon withdrew his gaze from Robel.

“From our investigation, we judged the murder to be a mere pretext for the real purpose. There was not even a minimum intention to hide the perpetrator. Then, should we assume that there is something they hoped for in the subsequent movements of those who discovered this case?”

That was true. Yuder nodded cautiously, and Kishiar began to summarize the current situation after the incident.

“We don’t need to talk about our movements anymore, and Baron Willhem has now concentrated all his forces on the investigation of this matter. He has strengthened the protection around the mansion several times and has withdrawn the knights patrolling throughout Tainu, leaving only the minimum number.”

“…It seems he started to be scared after feeling that those who he hasn’t even managed to catch even the tail can boldly come up to his doorstep.”

“Yes. Although he seems to be half-doubting so far, it’s clear what he’s thinking when you see the soldiers blocking between the annex and the main mansion since the murder occurred.”

The turnaround in attitude, which was trying to frame Yuder as the culprit just a few hours ago, was surprisingly quick.

“It seems that he’s been locked in his office since then, so he must be in contact with Duke Tain. He’s late in realizing the seriousness of the situation.”

Kishiar spoke with a cold smile.

“As a result, the security of Tainu is almost blank, except for a few places like the Security Management Team and the Willhem family

mansion. Of course, I sent the Peletta Knights and the Cavalry to various places to wait, but… By now, Duke Tain should realize that it's time to give up his stubbornness. I think they will formally ask us for help tomorrow."

"Then I might be able to leave here sooner than expected."

Knight Commander Jeymer Phil might be quite disappointed, but in the end, he was in a position to follow Baron Willhem unconditionally. Yuder was quite looking forward to seeing his reaction when he suddenly received the news to release Yuder without a proper second investigation.

"…Did you want to leave?"

Kishiar asked with a curious look in his eyes.

"Isn't it obvious?"

Yuder's purpose in coming here was primarily to meet Robel, save him, and obtain information, and secondarily to ensure that Kishiar and the Cavalry were not held back because of him. Since everything had been achieved, there was no reason to stay any longer.

"Seeing from the outside, you're sitting so comfortably that I was almost confused for a moment whether I sent my assistant to prison or to rest in his room. Thankfully, that is not the case."

Yuder, who had thought that this place was no different from his own room, silently averted his gaze.

"Before I came here, even when I sat down, it didn't feel like I was sitting," he said. "The one who should feel that way is completely unchanged, so it feels quite disheartening."

"…Did you really come to scold me?"

“You think I would willingly come here and think you wouldn’t even listen to this much?”

“I’m sorry, but…”

“You’re going to say this was the best choice, right? I know. There’s no need to apologize.”

The man who seemed to fully understand Yuder’s choice and reason responded in a low, subdued voice, then took a deep breath, closing his eyes and opening them again.

“Next time, however, I’ll make you think that a different choice is the best.”

After uttering a cryptic sentence, Kishiar skillfully masked his emotions.

“Now, let’s think about what those who have stolen everything from the secret vault in the Red Deer Consortium are really after based on the current situation we summarized.”

“…Understood.”

What do Nahan and Ershi currently want?

Their original goal was to uncover the secret trade conducted by Tain Duchy and expose it to the world, delivering punishment. In fact, that goal was not very different from Kishiar’s. The difference was only in the method used to achieve the purpose.

‘They’ve already obtained information related to secret trade in Great Sarain Forest and Tainu. They caused an explosion, creating chaos in the city, and have probably tracked the movements of Baron Willhem.’

Yet, they seemed to have not reached the real core of the matter. It could be that the information they obtained was not complete, or something was blocking them, even if they had the right information.

Would those persistent individuals give up, though?

‘If they were to, they wouldn’t have committed murder in Baron Willhem’s house after the explosion incident.’

Nahan’s side was intentionally increasing the city’s terror. Until now, the nobles had only recognized these events as minor incidents while hunting down the Awakeners terrorist group that had killed Tainu’s Knights. But after today, that would no longer be the case. As chaos intensifies, it becomes impossible to dismiss or hide this matter. Chaos was also the best emotion to paralyze human judgment.

A fearful Baron Willhem. The current situation in Tainu, where the city gates were closed, and internal security was focused in one area. The explosions that had occurred so far. The current locations of key figures involved. Possible strategies Nahan might take based on experience. All the words Yuder had heard so far… Yuder’s mind was tirelessly working.

“…Ah.”

A moment later, he unknowingly let out a small sound.

“Did something come to mind?”

It could be a guess. However, he wanted to confirm one thing.

“Commander. Among the few places where the Knight has not withdrawn yet, except for the Baron’s mansion and the security management team… Is the house of Graham Willhem included?”

Before coming to the security management team, Baron Willhem had ordered the Knight Commander, Jeymer Phil, to be summoned from Graham Willhem's house to investigate Yuder. If the most significant change caused by this murder was the reassignment of forces within the city, the relocation of the Knight Commander was one of the most critical matters.

Yuder's words seemed to have triggered some suspicion, and Kishiar narrowed his eyes.

"…According to Nathan's investigation and report today, he was involved in the explosion in the warehouse district that happened yesterday," he said.

"It must have been in the Red Deer Consortium warehouse area, right?"

"Yes. It was one of the places the Pelleta Knights were keeping an eye on."

Yuder finally drew a conclusion.

"The real target they were after through this incident might have been that person."

Even though the death of the second younger sibling and spouse didn't faze him, Baron Willhem had sent even the Commander of the Knights to guard the front of Graham Willhem's home. Was it simply because the second younger sibling and spouse were leeches on the Baron's fortune, and Graham Willhem was a capable person trusted with the Red Deer Consortium? The Baron that Yuder knew was not that kind of person.

What was the first incident that the enemy had instigated in Tainu? Even after the Red Deer Consortium building explosion that Robel had mentioned, they again caused an explosion in a warehouse-dense area of the consortium warehouse, 'coincidentally'

injuring Graham Willhem. Could all of this have merely been the result of chance?

From the beginning, they had been focusing on the Red Deer Consortium warehouse. Graham Willhem, a central figure in the warehouse, could have been a target as well.

“Then, the likelihood that yesterday’s incident was aimed at Graham Willhem to unravel the warehouse and fan the flames of chaos is high.”

Without any further explanation, Kishiar quickly understood Yuder’s intention. His words were exactly what Yuder was about to say.

“Robel said he has read almost all the papers taken from the secret vault. But considering there was no movement for a while afterward, I think the information obtained was either incomplete or something was blocked. So then…”

“First, create a noisy event to divert the enemy’s attention, and then target the real goal… The tactics of someone who knows how to deal with the military. Attempting this despite knowing the huge difference in power must mean they were very confident.”

“Or they might have committed it, considering all the possible damage as well.”

“Right. Bold and ruthless. Very like them.”

Kishiar uttered with a sharp smile, and Yuder agreed with his words.

‘Yes, that’s their way. Whether it’s a dangerous strategy where their comrades take great risks or not, if they survive and succeed, they’ll have achieved their goal.’

It wasn’t merely a plan to trip up the Cavalry or create internal strife; they had thought of taking it a step further. As Kishiar said, it was indeed bold and risky. Yet surprisingly, up to now, coincidences had piled up, and they had achieved much more significant success than expected.

Baron Willhem quickly moved his knights and troops, thinking that they were targeting him. There were still some guarding Graham Willhem and the Red Deer Consortium warehouse, but the number must have been much less than before. Moreover, with Yuder’s involvement, the attention of the Cavalry was now focused on the murder and security management team.

With one audacious murder, they diverted the enemy’s attention, created chaos, made an opportunity to get what they wanted, and even tied up Yuder’s feet. If they wanted to move, now was the perfect moment.

“We have no time. We must move immediately.”

Kishiar turned the sapphire embedded in the bracelet-shaped magic tool he had on. It flashed once, and shortly after, Nathan Zuckerman appeared.

“Did you call me?”

Nathan Zuckerman looked at Yuder, who was inside the room, with a momentary, complex gaze.

“Nathan, have there been any changes in the situation?”

“None so far.”

“Good. Contact those near the broken building of the Red Deer Consortium and Graham Willhem’s house, and we’ll move immediately. Time is of the essence.”

“I will go ahead and send the message.”

Nathan did not ask his lord why he gave such an order. Before rising from his seat, Kishiar looked briefly at Yuder’s face beyond the bars.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Take care.”

The farewell was simply that. Kishiar and Nathan melted into the darkness and vanished as quietly as they had come. Yuder sat for a while as if he had dreamed the entire event, putting his hand into his pocket. The warmth emanating from the heating stone and the lingering cool scent in the air made him realize that it had all been real.

‘…Then shall I make my move now?’

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Chapter 367

Considering that Kishiar would be moving all night without rest, Yuder couldn't waste time sitting still inside the prison. He had no intention of sleeping anyway, and his mental fatigue had subsided thanks to the unexpected visitor.

Yuder glanced at Robel, who was still sleeping, then rose from his seat. Adjusting the cloak over his shoulders, he checked for any presence around him, then exerted strength to grab the bars of the jail. A suffocating sensation spread through his chest as the space widened just enough for one person to slip out. When he went outside and returned the bars to their original position, only an empty jail cell remained as if no one had ever been there.

'Normally, it's something I wouldn't even have to move my hand for.'

He quieted any noise and hid his body in the shadows as he began to survey the third floor of the underground. He had speculated that there were almost no prisoners trapped on the third floor since it was quiet, but looking closely, it seemed as if there had never been anyone there except them.

'Perhaps the first floor is for petty criminals… if the second floor is for serious criminals, then the third must be a space for others.'

The soldiers had said that this place had been around for nearly a thousand years. That meant it had been created almost as soon as Tainu had appeared.

'It must have been that the situation was so chaotic back then that so many prisons were needed, even though the Empire hadn't been around for long.'

Though he wasn’t particularly interested in ancient history and didn’t know much about it, the fact that there were so many prisons relative to the size of the city could not be a good sign. He thought the book that Pruelle had given him might have more detailed information, and at that moment, the face of the person who had given him the cloak and the warm stone also came to mind.

Normally, at this time, they would be wrapping up their day in their respective places. Before going to bed, Kishiar always read his received letters again or inspected his sword. In front of Yuder, it was just wrapping and tying the sword sheath, but he was slightly surprised when he learned that Kishiar got up early in the morning and consistently swung his sword in another room.

Just as Yuder had time to close his eyes and gather his strength as soon as he woke up, the practice of rising at dawn, training, and washing seemed to have a similar function for Kishiar. It was not surprising that the callus of a swordsman, so accustomed to striving without attracting others’ attention, did not fade.

Although he seemed to live a reckless life fitting a Duke of Peletta, the fact that he meticulously commanded work and never neglected training seemed like him, but Yuder did not express this outwardly, fearing it might be a distraction. Kishiar also probably had similar thoughts since he never mentioned it, knowing that Yuder did such a thing as soon as he got up.

It was a brief time, somehow made special by the lack of back-and-forth conversation.

Lost in thought, Yuder heard again an eerie and sharp sound of the wind from somewhere. He quickly erased the image of Kishiar’s face reading the report by the light and strained his ears to identify the direction of the sound.

The distant scream, mixed and distorted as it passed through long, rough crevices of rock, definitely felt alien compared to an

ordinary wind sound.

‘It sounds like something that would happen if you didn’t close the door properly during a snowstorm in winter… But now it’s not winter, and this is a deep underground place. Something is definitely strange.’

After the sound ceased, Yuder changed his direction. For ordinary people, it might have been hard to discern, but with experience in tracking targets, it was not difficult to find the direction with such traces.

A short while later, Yuder arrived at the point he deemed closest to where the sound had come from.

“Is this the place…?”

It was the end of an empty corridor. The cells nearby were vacant, and naturally, there was no sign of human presence. However, something about the location bothered him.

“If there were a fourth floor, the stairs would have been located around here.”

The prison had been constructed in such a way that the stairs were placed at opposite ends on each floor to counter any potential escape attempts. If the stairs going down from the ground floor to the first floor were at the right end, then to go down to the second floor, one had to go all the way to the left end. And to go down again to the third floor, one had to go back to the right end.

And where Yuder was standing now was at the far opposite end from the stairs that led down to the third floor. He began to look around, searching for anything unusual, but nothing caught his eye.

“There’s no place for the wind to leak through. But I definitely heard it here…”

Then, louder than before, the sound of the wind came again. Because it was the loudest in that place, it seemed as though human voices were strangely mixed with the wind.

Hoooo… uuuu…

Woo…

The sound quieted down again. Although the surroundings became still as if nothing had happened, Yuder's senses remained sharply alert.

"There might be something after all. But it's too dark to examine properly. I have no choice but to conjure a flame."

Summoning a flame the size of a candle, he began to scrutinize the end of the corridor and the nearby cells in greater detail. As he felt along the weathered stone wall, he suddenly perceived an unexpected texture. Upon illuminating it, he discovered it was some faintly carved symbol.

"Is this not the crest of the Tain family?"

The Tain family's crest was a shield entwined with deer antlers. It was a symbol that almost exactly matched the seal Yuder had seen at the end of the letter from the Duke of Tain. Finding it engraved on the prison wall was quite mysterious. He continued to feel around and soon found a second symbol not far away. The two symbols were engraved at the same height, facing each other.

After confirming that no other wall bore the same symbol, Yuder decided to step back for the time being.

"The patrol should be coming around again soon."

During his time in the prison, he had been mentally counting to gauge the soldiers' patrol intervals. Since the number he had been

estimating was almost at its limit, he had to leave soon.

“I timed it just right.”

Yuder had just reentered his cell when he heard the soldiers coming down from the second floor. Robel was snoring in oblivion. As he pretended to sleep, Yuder heard the approaching soldiers muttering.

“The Duke thought he was as good as dead, and yet he even gave him that expensive cloak. Look at the jewels on that guy’s clothes. Wonder how much they’re worth.”

“One of those would be enough to live on for a lifetime. Must feel great to have someone to get you out even when you’re locked up. Ptooey.”

“Anyway, we agreed to act like we didn’t see anything. Let’s go.”

“…”

After they disappeared, Yuder silently opened his eyes. It was a comment that might have offended him before, but he didn’t feel bad at all. Satisfaction swelled within him, knowing that finally, his efforts were bearing fruit.

‘I hadn’t realized… Thinking about it, this situation must look even more so from the outside.’

Feeling content, he sat down and spent the night reflecting on the information he had gathered, pondering over what might be happening on Kishiar’s side. It promised to be a night far from tiring.

…

The next day, Yuder was eating breakfast with Robel brought by the soldiers, who were astonished by the fact that he had slept so

soundly, when Tainu's Knight commander, Jeymer Phil, arrived. He wore a disgusted expression as he informed him that, just as Yuder had expected, there would be no second investigation, and that he would be released soon.

"Last night, His Grace Duke Peletta and the Cavalry found the real culprit behind the murder. Regrettably, they did not capture the culprit, but they did rescue Graham Willhem, who was nearly abducted by them. Therefore, you will be released soon."

"Is that true?"

"Release him and let him go."

Whether Robel was surprised or not, Jeymer Phil turned away after saying what he needed to say. Yuder rose abruptly from his seat, watching the soldiers unlocking the closed door with keys.

"Go on."

"I don't know what happened while I was asleep. Suddenly, so quickly…"

Seeing Yuder, who was not surprised at all, Robel seemed to want to ask something, but he closed his mouth, perhaps conscious of the soldiers. When they stepped outside the prison, those who had been waiting greeted them enthusiastically.

"Yuder! You're out!"

"Sleeping in a cold place for the night, home is still the best, right? Huh?"

Ever was not seen, but a substantial number of other familiar-faced members had gathered. Though not surprised by his release, seeing Yuder slightly disconcerted by his colleagues who proudly

pounded on him in front of the security management team, Robel wore an expression that seemed both knowing and unknowing.

“Why are you looking like you’re wondering why so many have gathered?”

Finn Eldore, standing at the front, grinned mischievously and slapped his arm for the first time in a while.

“Yuder said that garbage is to be cleaned up after everything is done. So we’ve come to clean it up!”

“Let’s go!”

The Cavalry members charged unanimously at the Tainu Knights, resonating with Finn’s words.

“Get out of the way! The Commander said he’s going to make a Cavalry investigation headquarters here, so make room!”

“This is our place now! We’re taking the chairs, one for each person!”

“What, what?”

Before the bewildered knights could react, the Cavalry members rushed inside the security management team with a cry, an air of determination not to let anyone stop them.

As Yuder looked on impassively, someone standing beside him chuckled.

“My assistant’s prediction was spot on. Of course, the real beginning is now.”

“Commander.”

Kishiar pulled Yuder’s shoulder, directing him towards a carriage on one side.

“Where are we going?”

“We’ve been working all night; isn’t it time to rest? Let’s talk on the way.”

The Peletta knights led Robel, who looked bewildered, towards another carriage in the back. Yuder, along with Kishiar, climbed into a carriage and left the security management team, heading back to the mansion of Baron Willhem.

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Chapter 368

“I heard that you saved Graham Willhem from being kidnapped.”

“Yes. If I had been even slightly later, he would probably have been snatched away right before my eyes.”

Amidst the faint noise of the carriage running, Kishiar smiled as he replied.

“Exactly what happened?”

“It’s probably not much different from what you expected.”

Last night, just after meeting Yuder, Kishiar had headed straight for Graham Willhem’s house along with Nathan Zuckerman. Already in the vicinity were several members of the Peletta Knight and Cavalry, who had gathered while waiting for Nathan’s summons. Within them, Kishiar found the face of Deputy Commander Ever Beck.

“Many have gathered despite the sudden call. We have no time to wait, so we’re departing with the current personnel.”

Upon hearing that the Star of Nagran might be targeting Graham Willhem, a tense look spread across the faces of the Cavalry members and Knights. Kishiar instructed Nathan Zuckerman to take the Knights and surround Graham Willhem’s mansion, hiding and waiting, and then personally proceeded with just the Cavalry. Though the Knights had more experience in these missions, this task had to be accomplished solely by the strength of the Cavalry for it to have meaning. The members, who had not fully guessed this fact, thought they were going alone to fight the Awakeners.

Graham Willhem’s grand and old-fashioned mansion was eerily quiet, even considering the late hour. There were soldiers guarding the front with torches, but their motionless faces, as they stared ahead without a word to each other, looked almost doll-like and grim.

“Emun Philang. How does the situation inside the mansion look?”

Asking this of Emun, who had brighter eyes than the others in the darkness, a response came after a moment.

“It’s… unnatural. Despite the lights being on, no one is seen passing through the internal corridors, and all six dogs in the garden are asleep.”

“There’s no need to look further.”

Even as he boldly advanced towards the front door, the soldiers guarding Graham’s house gave no reaction. When Kishiar stretched out his hand and exerted his power, they fell like wooden logs. Though they didn’t bleed, they were in a state as good as dead.

“We will split into two groups and simultaneously enter through the front and back doors. Ever Beck will lead those entering from the back.”

As he finished speaking, everyone drew their weapons in unison. Even Kishiar drew his sword, and all eyes were fixed on him. The members had often seen their Commander participating in training, but this was the first time most of them had seen him holding a real sword.

Shortly after Kishiar had left for the west, Emperor Keilusa announced that he had become the new owner of the Divine Sword Orr. However, Kishiar himself had yet to comment on this rumor.

Whether their Commander truly owned the Divine Sword or not, the members didn’t care, but at this moment, they couldn’t help but

feel excited. They were about to witness the strength of the man leading them, and this fact alone filled them with indescribable reassurance.

“Those entering from the back door will prioritize searching the inside and rescuing survivors. If you encounter the enemy, suppression is the priority, but more is permitted if necessary.”

Quickly giving orders, Kishiar scanned the faces of the members.

“Lastly, just in case, if anyone feels unprepared to proceed, speak now.”

“…”

No one backed down. The eyes of the members, who had undergone long training and waiting, were filled with determination and anticipation.

“Are there no questions?”

“Commander. If we finish this well, Yuder can return sooner, right?”

All the members listened intently to the careful inquiry from Ever, who had raised her hand. Kishiar seemed momentarily surprised and fell silent, but soon relaxed his face and smiled.

“Of course. I should have mentioned first that Yuder Aile was the one who guessed that our enemies would target this place.”

The faces of those who heard the answer brightened.

“We will see you when it’s all over!”

Kishiar, leading half of the members, entered through the main gate via the garden of Graham Willhem’s house. As Emun had said, there was no sign of the dogs that should have guarded the garden.

The heavy main gate also opened weakly towards the inside as soon as Kishiar reached out.

The mansion was eerily quiet. Before long, a member who sensed a presence through the wind pointed to a room. Inside, there were servants lying in a pool of blood.

“It’s too late to save them.”

“The injuries are the same as the bodies in the mansion. It seems they have not been dead for long.”

The manner of killing was similar to that of Baron Willhem’s younger brother and sister-in-law in the mansion. This meant that, at least, Ershi was certainly here. Praising the members for excellently deducing that the enemies were few since no one was left at the scene, Kishiar headed to the floor above.

The elite often used the top floor as bedrooms, and in this mansion, the top was the third floor. As they climbed the grand staircase and neared the third floor, a faint scream was heard.

“Sa, save me…!”

Kishiar confirmed that the voice belonged to Graham Willhem and raised his sword, signaling his members. At the same time, his power thrust all the doors open in the mansion, revealing the interior.

The vast bedroom was in complete disarray. Beyond the bodies of servants and Tainu Knights, a few men and women with covered faces stood. Graham Willhem was among them, tied up in his nightwear, pitifully sobbing and struggling. Kishiar, catching a glimpse of the wide-open window, smiled.

“Your Highness!”

“It’s the Cavalry. Step back.”

No sooner had Graham Willhem shouted at the sight of Kishiar than a woman with a white mask on her face threatened him with a blade at his throat, warning her comrades. Kishiar confirmed that she was the woman, Ershi, who had been with Nahan.

“How did you get here so quickly…?”

“Shut up.”

The woman, Ershi, failing to hide her surprise, roughly snapped at her mumbling comrade and pulled Willhem closer without loosening her grip.

“It seems we surprised you by arriving so soon.”

“…”

“Let him go. He seems about to wet himself.”

Ershi did not respond. As her grip tightened, blood dripped from Graham’s throat. It was an unbelievable sight. Graham Willhem let out a stifled scream and wetted his pajamas, then fainted, overcome by shame and terror.

“Indeed. He’s as weak as his brother.”

Kishiar was nonchalant, but his calm only sharpened Ershi’s gaze. She was the only person who had seen how this man had attacked Nahan. Intense hatred and caution surrounded her, but Kishiar did not react at all.

“I thought Nahan would be here too, but since I don’t see him, he didn’t come with you?”

“It’s not that the wound on him hurts, and he can’t come; it seems like he’s waiting somewhere else.”

“…”

“It’s a shame if you planned to kidnap the counselor of the Red Deer Consortium to extract information. If you had been a little later, you could have succeeded. I acknowledge your boldness, though.”

Even without a response, the eyes of those who looked at Kishiar, who accurately deduced the entire situation, quivered in surprise and terror. Most of them were not accustomed to such situations. It was the limit of people who originally lived ordinary lives, who did not even know the minimum way to keep their intentions from being read by an opponent in a battle situation.

Kishiar stared quietly, as if trying to read their faces hidden behind masks. When Nahan’s name was mentioned, one among them showed an even more intense reaction than Ershi. Seeing the skin color revealed between the folds of clothing, it seemed likely he was a Southerner.

‘A Southerner.’

“What are you looking at? Move even a little, and I’ll kill this person.”

“Well, killing him will only hurt you; I recommend against such reckless action.”

There is no enemy as frightening as the incomprehensible one. As the Awakener, who felt instinctive fear from the unnervingly unconcerned opponent, swayed, Ershi pushed Graham Willhem backward, baring her sharp teeth.

“Aaargh!”

As Ershi swung her hand, yelling, a force as sharp as a sword erupted, flying indiscriminately toward Kishiar and the Cavalry. Those Awakeners standing around her also moved quickly as if they had planned it. The flying force was blocked by the members who had stepped forward before Kishiar could even move his hand. Still, the

black smoke dispersed by one of the Awakeners as an ability exploded with a loud noise, and the attack began in an instant.

“Hosanna! Quickly!”

“Drive the smoke away with the wind!”

A very brief moment filled with coughs and shouts, the sounds of fighting.

Kishiar moved straight ahead without closing his eyes, reaching the spot where Graham Willhem had fallen in an instant. Someone attacked desperately to prevent Graham from being taken, but it was in vain. In a few concise movements that would have made others doubt their eyes, all the attacks aiming for him within the unseen smoke were torn apart, and it was enough to go beyond and cut down the opponent.

Along with a scream, a great wind blew, and the entire house vibrated.

A moment later, the Cavalry members found their leader, half holding a partly collapsed wall and Graham Willhem, like a piece of luggage.

“Commander!”

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In the darkness, a swift exchange of attacks left a few among the members slightly wounded, but Kishiar was untouched, not even a crease in his clothing. The members caught their breath at the sight of a wall, collapsed as though bent by a sword, in a very neat ruin to the point where the roof was visible. It was clear to anyone who looked that it was Kishiar's doing.

Although he simply stood there and did nothing, he felt somehow different than usual. Just holding his sword wrapped in blue sword energy and suppressing a smile, no one dared approach him. Kishiar, gazing indifferently at the night sky through the gap of the broken wall in the silence, withdrew the energy from his sword and sheathed it a moment later. Only then did the chill that had been lingering around him vanish as if it were a lie.

"Is everyone safe?"

"Yes!"

Kishiar's cool gaze moved from the blood scattered on the ground to his own hand. He sensed that one more person had been caught besides Graham Willhem, but after the smoke cleared, no one was there.

Kishiar recalled the teleporter from the Star of Nagran that his assistant had met at the Apeto Duke's mansion. It appeared that the young man from the South was here.

"It's unfortunate, but… I'll have to postpone returning the favor for putting my assistant in prison."

The members looked outside just in case, but naturally, there was no sign of the escapees. Kishiar handed over the limp Graham

Willhem to the members and ordered them to clean up the surroundings. Shortly after, Ever and other members who had finished searching the mansion joined, and Nathan Zuckerman arrived leading the Knights.

Except for two servants who had luckily hidden and survived, everyone who had stayed in the mansion was killed or gravely injured by Ershi's hand. Graham Willhem, who woke up in Baron Willhem's house, pleaded for his life with half his mind gone. The Baron could no longer deny who had killed one of his siblings and left another in such a state.

"If they hadn't insisted on killing everyone in the mansion, we might not have been able to rescue Graham."

However, that terrible vengefulness had tripped them up, and the Cavalry could not miss the opportunity.

After hearing Kishiar's entire story, Yuder fell into thought for a moment.

"If you heard the name Hosanna, it seems certain that the Awakener with teleporting ability was there. I must ask Robel about it too."

"There's quite a bit I'd like to ask him as well. But let's rest today and do that tomorrow."

It was a gentle but firm voice. Yuder, who had intended to ask Robel immediately, agreed to wait.

"Did Graham Willhem say anything to them?"

"He hadn't come to his senses when I left. We'll know soon when we go back. Baron Willhem formally asked for our help this morning."

Of course, he only asked for help in capturing those who were disturbing Tainu, keeping his lips sealed about the secret trade. But that alone had already achieved the goal.

“My assistant, alone in the cold place, must be waiting for me anxiously now since I said I would listen to the story in detail after bringing him back.”

Kishiar said, smiling, and his face did not show any signs of fatigue.

Many people were out in front of the returning Baron Willhem’s mansion. The Cavalry members who came out to greet Yuder, Enon and Lusan, Nathan Zuckerman and the Peletta Knights, and Pruelle, holding a cat. Funnily enough, among them, the homeowner, Baron Willhem, seemed the most out of place.

With a very uncomfortable face, Baron Willhem, who had been enduring, quickly approached Yuder and opened his mouth just as Yuder landed.

“Thanks to the information provided by Sir Aile, I’ve heard that my brother Graham was able to escape the hands of the lawless. I also heard that you had a hard time during the investigation due to a small misunderstanding yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“Despite my orders to investigate courteously, Knight Commander Phil and the Knights did not listen to me. I plan to speak directly to them, so please calm your mind. I also hope that you will help us with your abilities in the future. If you need anything, just say it.”

Whether disgusted by his sudden change of attitude, Finn Eldore, who was standing in the back, secretly made a retching gesture.

Having seen men like Baron Willhem in his previous life more than once, Yuder simply reacted calmly.

“Then, Your Highness, I will visit you again soon.”

After the Baron disappeared, Pruelle, who was holding a cat, came up and congratulated him.

“Congratulations on coming back, Sir Aile. How do you feel?”

“Thanks, I’m fine.”

“I’m glad I could help. When I asked if it was alright to go out to greet you in the presence of Duke Peletta, he graciously allowed it.”

So far, Pruelle had maintained the official stance that he had only had personal meetings with Kishiar, who had found the cat for him. The fact that he was an Awakener, the identity of the cat he had brought, and other details remained a secret known only to Kishiar and Yuder. But from today, as the Cavalry formally developed into assisting Baron Willhem and others, Kishiar seemed to intend to reveal his closeness with Pruelle a little more.

Those who knew that the first prince had gone to the security management team for Yuder yesterday were not as guarded towards Pruelle as they were towards Baron Willhem.

In the eyes of the members who each threw a word of hardship to Yuder, there were not only simple worries and comforts but also some unfamiliar emotions. Yuder was caught among them, who came to pat his back and bump fists, and only returned to the quarters with Kishiar after a long whirl. Stopping at the sight of the magic stove, which had not been there yesterday, burning with warmth and light in front of the fireplace, Kishiar playfully asked,

“How does it feel to be back?”

“…It’s only been one night.”

Kishiar laughed at the trembling answer.

“It was a night like 10 years.”

“Are you planning to go see the Baron right away?”

“I plan to do so after seeing my assistant change clothes and lie down.”

Yuder looked down at the formal attire still weighing heavily on his shoulders.

“I just remembered… I have something to tell you.”

“What? I hope nothing else happened while you were in prison.”

“…It’s something like that.”

At Yuder’s words, Kishiar’s eyebrows went up slightly.

“Yesterday, while I was locked up, I kept hearing strange noises from somewhere. The soldiers thought it was the sound of wind leaking, but I thought it was strange, so I went out for a while to check.”

“…You went out?”

“Of course, I wasn’t caught.”

Kishiar stared at Yuder, who answered calmly, for a long time, then tilted his head.

“…So, what did you find?”

“I found the mark of the Tain family engraved on the wall in the place where I judged the sound came from, and I remembered it, but

I think we need to compare it with the book that Pruelle Van Tain gave us to check.”

Yuder detailed the location and condition of the mark he saw, as well as the structure of the stairs. After listening quietly to the story, Kishiar sighed and replied after it all ended.

“I figured you wouldn’t rest even in prison, but you’ve managed to get quite a lot done.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What’s there to be sorry about? So, how’s your body?”

If Yuder was going to get scolded for acting on his own, he was prepared to accept it, but he did not sense any anger from Kishiar. When Yuder replied that his health was fine, Kishiar quietly pointed to the place where the change of clothes was laid and ordered him to rest.

“The security management team has now become our new workplace, so we’ll look into that part soon. First, wash and eat. I’ve ordered Lusan and Enon to come, so you can receive treatment as well.”

“There’s no need for that…”

Yuder, continuing to speak, nodded his head upon seeing Kishiar’s casual smile.

“Understood.”

“That’s a good answer.”

The man, smiling a bit more deeply, reached out and brushed Yuder’s eyes. Unlike the night before, today his hand felt a little colder. His body temperature had returned to normal.

Strangely enough, it was only then that the reality of having “returned” truly sank in.

“Yuder, it seems like you’ve lost weight overnight. No matter the investigation, how could they be so harsh as to make you spend a night in prison… These people really have no compassion.”

–-

“Why didn’t you eat more than that? You usually eat more.”

Yuder, squeezed between Lusan and Enon for a meal, received nagging under the name of treatment as Kishiar had foretold.

“I already ate bread in prison.”

“Is that all they gave you?”

“They gave me water, too.”

“… If I didn’t know what kind of person you were, I would have thought you were joking and slapped you.”

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Why did they think it was a mere joke? It had been only about an hour since Yuder had devoured precisely seven and a half of the bread given to him in the prison, facing the trembling expressions of the soldiers and whatever you could say of Robel's unease. In such circumstances, having emptied the stew bowl twice, he had not eaten less than usual. Just for reference, the reason he did not eat the eighth piece of bread was because Jeymer, the Knight Commander, had come to release him in the middle.

Of course, the bread he ate there wasn't as soft or warm as the bread set out on the current table, but it wasn't stony or rotten, and the water was clean. From past experience, the food given in prison was a considerable guest treatment.

Still, seeing Enon's concern for him as much as Lusan's, Yuder silently ate more of the prepared dishes. Only after finishing the meal was he finally able to receive a proper examination instead of a mere verbal check-up.

"Sir Yuder, I heard you used your power extensively yesterday while chasing someone within the mansion before going to the public security management team. Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes."

"The spot on your left eye is still there. What about the back of your hand?"

Yuder quietly removed his glove. A faint black stain remained on the exposed back of his hand. Between them, bright red spots appeared, which Enon and Lusan carefully examined.

"The black stain seems to have diminished since we last saw it."

“But the range of the spots is the same, isn’t it? Hasn’t it actually increased?”

Enon’s sharp gaze was directed at Yuder.

“What do you mean? How much did you use when I told you not to use your power unless necessary?”

“Don’t be like that, Sir Enon. Yuder has returned after a hard time.”

Lusan, in his innocence, stopped Enon and began to pour divine power into Yuder’s hand. As a white light covered his hand, it felt like hot water had been poured from his arm into the inside of his body. Yuder took advantage of the moment to ask Lusan about the people who had lost their memory.

“How are the people under Priest Lusan’s care?”

“They’re getting along as usual. Is it because of what you asked the Commander yesterday?”

Lusan quickly seemed to realize why Yuder was asking about them.

“That’s right.”

“When I informed Marty of the appearance and name of the servant that Sir Yuder caught, she was greatly surprised. She never thought that person would have infiltrated here… What happened to him?”

“That person was Marty’s lover, as it turns out. Thanks to that, I was able to quickly gain cooperation as soon as I informed him of Marty’s survival.”

Yuder explained the incidents that Robel had experienced and the circumstances that led him to undertake the reckless infiltration alone. Lusan expressed surprise and regret at the tragic misunderstanding of the lovers, which was distorted by Nahan and his followers.

“For now, Robel has been released with me and brought here. He wanted to see Marty, but… what do you think, Priest?”

Robel desperately wanted to meet Marty, but Marty’s opinion was also essential in this matter. They couldn’t forcibly make them meet if one side did not want it. Believing that Lusan, who had been taking care of those who had lost their memory the closest, would make the most accurate judgment, he asked, and Lusan opened his mouth with a thoughtful expression.

“Among those who have regained their memory, Marty’s condition is indeed the best, but … it might be difficult right now. Shall I first inform her of the situation and ask her opinion, then let you know?”

“Of course.”

If that was the case, it would have been rather appreciated by Yuder.

“Then I should go meet her first since the matter has come up. The divine healing is over, so I’ll leave the rest to you, Enon. Call me whenever you need me.”

“Alright.”

Enon waved his hand dismissively, as if urging her to leave quickly. As Lusan left the room, Yuder felt Enon’s gaze on his cheek change, becoming a little more biting than before.

“…Now, tell me honestly. How much power have you used?”

“Other than a slight use to check how much power has returned every morning… only a little when catching Robel yesterday, and a bit within the security management team.”

“Why did you use it within the security management team?”

“I briefly escaped the prison to scout outside.”

“Oh really… Did you think I’d accept that? Is that a little? Huh?”

The pharmacist’s words didn’t make sense, did they? A sharp voice came closer, accompanied by a pinching and shaking of the cheek. It felt chilly under the skin, but Yuder obediently offered his face. Losing enthusiasm because his opponent didn’t resist, Enon sat down again, his face looking as if he were dying in agony.

“Were you really okay? You took the medicine I gave you that time and suddenly had a fever… and acted all weird, didn’t you?”

Unable to utter the word “lust” directly, his words momentarily faltered, but Yuder didn’t care and answered obediently.

“Nothing like that has happened since then. I’ve recovered some power, too. But… sometimes when I use my power, it feels like something is blocking me.”

“A blocking feeling?”

“It feels like there’s more power I can unleash, but only a much smaller amount comes out. Like a feeling of suffocation, should I say…?”

“You crazy fool. You should have said that first!”

Enon grabbed Yuder’s opposite cheek once more.

“…I thought it was a temporary phenomenon at first. I realized it wasn’t only yesterday.”

The pronunciation was muffled due to the pulled cheek, but the meaning was understood, and the hand soon let go.

“The feeling that there’s more power to be unleashed, but something is blocking it, so less comes out… Maybe it’s not such a bad sign.”

Enon’s conclusion, after much thought, was unexpectedly positive.

“It means that the energy-recovering medicine has had its effect after all. Your original power is returning, but the unorganized foreign power is blocking the channel to release it. Hmm, do you know what the channel is?”

“I know.”

Knights, Mages, Awakeners, and those with powers need a process to release the inner energy. People often refer to this as a ‘channel.’ Originally a term used by swordmasters, it’s now used by mages, and it wouldn’t be long before Awakeners would also naturally use it.

“If your original power had been small, it might not have been so uncomfortable, but since you have enormous power, it’s entirely possible. Perhaps I should say, it takes a tremendous amount of time to digest because it is recovering its original strength with a monster-like adaptability, but it also combines the monster’s poison and magic power.”

“So then…”

“If the desire to heal within you is working properly for now… It might be good to slowly try another method.”

“Is there a way?”

“Look at that. The eyes change at the word ‘method’. If you wanted to get better so badly, why didn’t you listen to the pharmacist?”

Enon, holding his chin, chuckled briefly.

“During this time, I have spent some time observing that small monster in the room of that stone-like knight gentleman. It seems that the monster’s power to swallow and digest magic may be in the poison component that replaces its body fluid. So, if my speculation based on your current state is correct… you might be able to use it too.”

“…”

What could he mean by that? Enon tilted his head, looking at Yuder’s face, slightly frowning in an almost knowing feeling.

“It sounds crazy, but you’re surprisingly calm. Do you want to hear more here?”

The answer was obviously predetermined.

…

“Damn it… I had a bad feeling ever since those untimely monsters started disturbing the western outskirts. How could such an absurd thing happen!”

The expensive dishes on the table struck by Duke Tain wobbled, making a noisy sound.

“Those wretched things dare to run amok in Tainu without knowing their place, and now that cowardly Duke Peletta, who had been ignoring it, tries to intercept the situation? That incompetent Willhem closed the gates in fear, and now even the Emperor is showing interest. What to do!”

“Calm yourself.”

The man sitting before Duke Tain opened his mouth indifferently. Except for his eyes, his entire body was wrapped in long fabric-made clothes and a veil, but the fact that he possessed the unique red skin tone of the southern people couldn’t be completely hidden.

“It is only a matter of that degree. What Your Highness is working on has not yet been revealed to anyone.”

“Willhem’s being so stupid there, how long can that last! I repeatedly told them to move the goods a day earlier…”

Duke Tain held his head and gritted his teeth. In his shaking hand, unable to contain his anger, was the piece from the dice game he had been playing for a high stake just moments before.

“The intervention of Duke Peletta and the Cavalry might actually be an opportunity for Your Highness.”

“Opportunity? What opportunity.”

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Arrogant and sharp as a blade, the voice of Duke Tain's craftiness did not make the Southerner flinch or cower in fear.

"You may be angry right now at Duke Pelleta's wickedness, but please look at the big picture. Wasn't the task you started already predicted to be a difficult venture? If the Emperor's gaze is drawn to the rats instead of Your Highness, this could actually be seen as a great fortune."

"I had anticipated that avoiding the Emperor's attention would be the biggest obstacle in this venture. But no matter what, this is too much."

Duke Tain scratched away at the words he had penned with a disgusted expression.

"Your Highness. Did you not say that opportunity comes with crisis? Whether the Cavalry catches those tenacious rats or not, divert attention to them as much as possible. Then Your Highness can take what you desire without issue. When they dance upon the shadow of an illusion-like honor, you will laugh without losing anything."

The Southerner finished speaking and sipped the tea in front of him.

Duke Tain rolled his eyes and clenched his jaw. His anger had not completely subsided, but the more he mulled over the Southerner's words, the more correct they seemed.

"Yes… you're right. Whether I turn a crisis into an opportunity is in my hands. There's no need to waste valuable money and manpower where it's not needed."

“Thank you for accepting my advice calmly.”

“It’s far better to listen to you, Athon, than those who can’t even do their job properly and are only greedy.”

The voice of the annoying Baron Willhem, who had been nagging for days to send more Knights and complaining about lack of money, came to the Duke’s mind and then disappeared. Even his cousin Theo, who never seemed to listen to his words, was better than that guy, but lately, nothing about his work had been satisfactory.

Who could be sure that a good result would come from giving more support to a man who, despite having all the resources of Tainu, had not completed a single task properly? The truth was that most of the finances were tied up, and it wasn’t even a situation where support could be given, but the Duke didn’t take that part seriously.

He felt much more at ease deciding to listen to the Southerner’s words. The Duke relaxed and leaned back comfortably in his chair.

“I’ll have to tell Willhem to leave this matter to the Cavalry and focus only on moving the goods.”

“What are your plans to accomplish this?”

“I’m thinking of using auctions and charity parties like last year. As before, send your top men to Tainu at the right time.”

“You’re entrusting this to us again?”

“Who else can I trust with this if not you?”

Upon hearing the Duke’s reply, the Southerner bowed his head in a courteous manner.

“I am always grateful for the trust and grace you give to me, a humble merchant from the south. However… there is one problem.”

“A problem?”

“It may be an unpleasant matter to discuss… may I speak of it?”

The Duke answered, irritably fiddling with a die, telling him to go on. Behind the veil hiding the Southerner’s face, his hard-to-read deep blue eyes shone.

“I have not mentioned this to you, for fear of troubling you, Your Highness, but in truth, the internal opposition within our family, which disapproves of us, has grown much stronger than last year.”

“What? Wasn’t that issue already resolved last time?”

“Even though it seems like they follow His Highness’ command on the surface, the watchful eyes on us have actually increased. Thus, if we go to Tainu again this time, there’s a high risk we will end up with needless tails following us.”

Duke Tain became angry and slammed the table again.

“Then what do you want me to do? No one in the family knows who the real master is!”

“If His Highness permits, we would like to be more cautious this time and contact those who are connected to us. They are people His Highness has met in the south before…”

Hearing the names of those mentioned by the Southerner, Duke Tain frowned.

“Yes… I do seem to remember them. They were southern mercenaries, weren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Do as you please.”

“If we send them, additional preparation and expenses may be required. That part is…”

“Handle it as before, and don’t bother me with the details.”

At Duke Tain’s indifferent reply, the Southerner faintly smiled.

“Yes. But is the First Prince still in Tainu?”

“There was no word of him coming, so probably.”

The answer from the Duke revealed no hint of concern for his child.

“That’s fine, either way. I’m in the mood to play a game now. Athon, it’s only fun with you, so let’s play ten rounds and then leave.”

The place where they were seated was the hidden lounge of the most secretive high-end gambling house in the imperial capital. Duke Tain often visited here when he had conversations he couldn’t have elsewhere.

The Southerner followed Duke Tain, who was leaving through the hidden door of the lounge, with a cold expression that quickly turned to a faint smile. Amongst the laughter of the nobles engrossed in gambling and the faint fragrance of exotic scents, nobody noticed the brief change in his demeanor.

“Athon! Come over here quickly. Give me some advice on how much to bet.”

Duke Tain shouted loudly from afar, afraid that the Southerner would be a little late. The man erased his cool expression and walked over with the same pleasant smile.

At the same time, a robust servant who had been cleaning unusually long nearby quickly pushed the trash aside and slipped out the back door.

He headed to the kitchen where food was being prepared for the guests inside the gambling house. An experienced middle-aged chef, who was skillfully decorating dessert bread, wiped his hands on his apron and came out when he saw Devran. They entered a staircase hidden from others' view.

"Did you already check everything, Devran? That's too fast."

"The Southerner came out of the lounge with the 'guest.' They are gambling now, so there won't be any changes for a while, Steiber."

Steiber Rendley, the Sul's Deputy Commander of the Cavalry, who was wearing chef's clothing, clicked his tongue.

"We should still make sure, since the Commander has trusted us with this task in the capital."

"How can we be more sure than this? There's a limit to how much I can snoop around those high-ranking people, just having slipped in as a servant. If you're so worried, Steiber, you should have done my part."

"What can I do if I've already passed the age to be picked as an Awakener servant in a gambling house?"

A few days ago, Kishiar sent a secret letter to Steiber, who was guarding the Cavalry. Inside was the location of a hidden high-end gambling house deep in the capital, along with what Devran Hartude and Steiber Rendley needed to do.

With the enclosed fake identity, get undercover employment in the gambling house, and then locate and investigate the nobleman,

Duke Tain, and the Southerner around him.

Why it was necessary to investigate not only Duke Tain but also the Southerner around him was not detailed. They merely guessed in secret that Kishiar, who had revealed the unforgivable sin of Duke Apeto to the world and was currently in the West after passing through the Great Sarain Forest, seemed to want to find out something related to the ruler of the West, the Tain family.

It would not have been too strange if the Commander, who had exposed Duke Apeto's inexcusable crime, had set his next target on Duke Tain's family. Though the idea of watching Duke Tain and his surroundings alone was somewhat daunting, what mattered was the fact that Kishiar had specifically designated them for this mission. The mere thought that their abilities had been distinctly recognized by the Commander made them feel a profound sense of responsibility.

The upscale gambling house frequented by nobles often hired cheap, commoner Awakener for security and labor cost savings. The robust and young Devran was easily hired, but Steiber, being older, had no choice but to enter as a cook.

The work wasn't particularly hard, but watching Duke Tain's surroundings at the gambling house had to be practically left to Devran, so Steiber's worries were not trivial.

"Anyway, about the Southerner who came today with the nobleman, he seemed different from the others who came with him before, even the nobleman's attitude towards him."

"What was different about him?"

"First of all, the time they spent together in the lounge was the longest, and… more than anything, it struck me that the nobleman seemed to trust him a great deal."

“Is that so? In what way?”

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“I’ve seen plenty of gamblers’ antics in the village where I lived, so I know them well. Those obsessed with gambling don’t listen to others, right? They do what they want. But the noble guest immediately questioned the fellow and even asked about the betting amount later on.”

In other words, the meaning was that the noble’s excessive reliance on the foreigner from the south who came with him that day seemed suspicious.

“Hmm… It does seem special indeed.”

“That’s what I’m saying. My intuition tells me he’s the most suspicious.”

After almost becoming the subject of Duke Apeto’s experiments and being rescued by Yuder, Devran was more loyal and diligent in his training than anyone else. Although he was a bit rough in speech, his wild instincts developed through experience were to be trusted.

“I remember the name the noble called him. It was Athon. Since you agree with my opinion, Steiber, shall we follow him when he leaves the gambling house later?”

Devran said the man was not armed and did not seem to be a mage or an Awakener. After some thought, Steiber agreed.

But Devran couldn’t carry out his intention. The Southerner, clad in clothing that looked suffocating just by looking at it, surprisingly did not even take a carriage when he left the gambling house and disappeared without a trace before they could follow.

…

Someone suddenly touched his cheek.

Startled, Yuder opened his eyes and realized that he had been half-asleep in the position where he was sitting. He seemed to have had a troubling dream, but he could not remember it well. It took him a moment to come back to reality, blinking blankly while the man who slapped him narrowed his brows and offered a faint smile in greeting.

“Did you sleep well?”

“…I apologize. I fell asleep without knowing you had arrived.”

“It’s natural, coming right after spending the night in a jail.”

The cool touch of the hand passed over his cheek, sweeping the disheveled hair from his forehead. The cold yet gentle sensation finally woke him up completely.

Yuder looked at Kishiar, still holding the remnants of the chilly wind from outside, and exhaled deeply.

“I think I told you to lie in bed after the treatment. It seems you didn’t even have the energy to go there. Will you lie down now?”

“No, I’m… I’m fully awake now.”

Straightening his posture and thinking back to what he was doing just before falling asleep, the answer soon came to him.

‘I was trying to think after hearing Enon’s words… Maybe I dozed off because the stove was too warm.’

Fortunately, the sun was still high outside the window. It seemed he hadn’t slept for too long.

“Did you finish talking with Baron Willhem, Commander?”

“For now.”

Kishiar briefly answered, then added after a moment.

“The Duke of Tain’s side said they would entrust us with all investigations related to incidents caused by the Awakeners from now on. If necessary, we can use the Tainu Knights and stationed troops, and they have also made clear their intention to let us handle the investigation headquarters we planned to set up in the public security management team.”

The priority of investigating incidents caused by Awakeners had always been the Cavalry’s job, so it was unclear what they were conceding, but it was good news anyway.

‘In return, the Duke of Tain will now begin to secretly cover up secret trade deals and process them in his favor, out of everyone’s sight.’

But that was precisely what Kishiar wanted, so it was something to be applauded.

Yuder opened his mouth, briefly conveying this intention.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

Kishiar slightly closed his eyes and smiled, suddenly placing something on Yuder’s knee. It was a cookie box that was simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.

“Nathan bought this yesterday, but now we can finally eat it. Shall we have a little while congratulating, and talk?”

Since they had already enjoyed a full breakfast that covered the tablecloth entirely, Yuder wasn’t particularly hungry. However, he

couldn’t refuse the cookies in the box that Kishiar had opened. Kishiar, watching him with a smile, began to speak again.

“Graham Willhem regained consciousness and was able to talk. The intruders demanded access to the upper basement and the decryption of encrypted information.”

“The internal information, is it related to what was stolen from the broken safe then?”

“It seems so, but Baron Willhem desperately wants to pretend that part never happened. I felt sorry for his efforts, so I played along for now. Of course, I plan to meet Graham again privately later.”

Yuder nodded, recalling Nathan Zuckerman’s report. It was clear that Nahan had not completely obtained the information he had taken from there. If he had been abducted last night, Graham Willhem would have quickly spilled all the information and then been killed.

“The members sent to the security management team have prepared a place to work, and Ever Beck finally found a place where they might be hiding and went to look, but unfortunately, they disappeared last night.”

He also added that the signs of a hasty departure made it apparent that they hadn’t been gone long. The fact that Ever wasn’t seen when they returned earlier seemed to be because of that.

“If we don’t find them now… they will surely appear again soon, won’t they?”

“It seems so. Judging by the news that many top associations in Tainu will gather to hold an auction this year, it seems that Duke Tain doesn’t think of delaying any longer.”

Although they were called top associations, they were places where Tain's hand could have reached. Not long ago, Kishiar had predicted that the auction would be held again, and it had become an accurate reality.

In Kishiar's playful eyes, Yuder could easily guess what he was thinking.

'If the news of the auction is known, Nahan will certainly not be able to deny that it will be a golden opportunity. And it will be our best chance to catch both rabbits.'

Sometimes, even knowing the danger, there comes a time when one must step forward to bite the bait in front of one's eyes. The auction that Duke Tain would hold was like that, and such was the choice that Ershi and Nahan, who would see through the identity of that auction, would make.

And the person who made all those choices inevitably the best was right in front of me.

Yuder took a small breath, feeling his heart pound.

Driving prey towards a cliff without them knowing is not easy, not something anyone can do. Standing on a cliff designated by Kishiar's predictions, they were bound to consider that moment an opportunity, not a cliff, achieved through the best choice.

The pieces that had been moving beneath the surface gathered and fell into place as the man in front of him had predicted. How remarkable was it to see up close the spectacle of all the words unknowingly finding their place one by one?

The fact that the moments when the Star of Nagran and Duke Tain had to move inevitably for their respective purposes had suddenly loomed large before them felt strangely unfamiliar. It felt as

though he had been asleep for days, even though he had actually only been asleep for a brief moment.

And as if reading such a strange feeling in Yuder, Kishiar spoke.

“Yes… If things continue like this, I’ll probably be able to get both rabbits I wanted without a big problem. There were variables that were more turbulent than expected, but it’s surprisingly perfect.”

Perfect.

He was chewing on those words, repeating them in his mouth, when the following words were heard.

“And the reason I was able to seize this perfect timing is probably that someone voluntarily came forward to avoid tripping me and my Cavalry.”

“…”

“Don’t you think?”

Although he had said “someone,” his red eyes were looking intently at just one place, to the point of bewilderment. Yuder opened his mouth awkwardly, blinking. Just making eye contact made the inside of his throat dry up again.

“…I didn’t do anything this time.”

“Really?”

“Shouldn’t it be adjutant Zuckerman or… Ever who hears those words?”

“Of course, I’ll praise them too after everything is over. But now is the time to praise the one who bore everything last night.”

A white hand reached out and grabbed Yuder’s hand.

“I kept thinking about what I could give to someone who would only feel burdened by anything material. It didn’t seem fitting, as if he had become the poorest person in the world. All I can do at most is tell him verbally what he accomplished. And…”

Over the unveiled black stain, Kishiar silently pressed his lips. Yuder’s fingertips shrank as if they were pricked by a knife, but the warmth that was pressed remained like a brand.

He wanted to tell him not to say such things.

He wanted to say that such praise, such greetings were not at all necessary for him.

Yuder Aile did not have the right to hear such words.

But all those words could not come out as sound from his mouth. Yuder, frozen in place, cast his eyes downward, painfully feeling the many holes inside himself.

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Chapter 373

“How is Sir Aile’s condition?”

“It’s nothing serious, but he looks fatigued. I think he can’t properly rest when I’m there, so I made sure he was lying down and then left.”

Kishiar walked ahead without hesitation, answering Nathan Zuckerman’s question as he waited outside the lodging. Though he wore a habitual smile, Nathan noticed that his eyes were more subdued than usual and chose not to ask further.

“Have those from Pelleta arrived in Tainu? Where are they now?”

“They are on standby near the mansion, ready to come whenever you call, but Shuden [TL: From the previous Shuden Trading Company] wishes to see you as soon as possible.”

“Time is precious not only for them. It will be difficult today, so tell them to come tomorrow. What’s the current situation in Tainu?”

“Since the city gates reopened and the square’s entrance restrictions were lifted, things have been as usual. The Tainu Knights and soldiers are not very cooperative, but that seems to be handled well by the Cavalry, so we don’t think we need to intervene.”

“Has any other information come from the place where the Star of Nagran lingered?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. It’s natural that tracking those who have hidden a village within the Great Sarain Forest for over a

year is difficult. Anyway, there's already an expected answer to where they will appear, so it doesn't matter."

However, the absence of Kanna Wand was a bit regrettable. Muttering to himself, Kishiar quickly let go of his attachment. He continued to ask various questions to Nathan Zuckerman, or gave brief instructions, and soon they were approaching the outside of the Mansion.

Suddenly, Kishiar stopped in his tracks.

"Why are you doing this?"

Despite Nathan's cautious inquiry, Kishiar gave no answer, lost in thought, staring somewhere. If it had been before, Nathan would have been alert, but now he did not. He quietly stood behind and waited for his lord to emerge from contemplation.

Kishiar had changed slightly since spending more time in the Great Sarain Forest than planned. He would process work quickly but occasionally stop as he was now, lost in deep thought.

His keen senses, honed from a long life at the bottom, still told Nathan Zuckerman much, even after obtaining a power that no one in the world needed to fear.

According to those senses, Kishiar's sudden deep thoughts were mostly related to Yuder Aile.

His lord's attitude toward that man had crossed a line since what had happened in the Great Sarain Forest. His behavior in Tainu afterward went without saying. Nathan felt an indescribable feeling, hidden behind frivolous yet meticulous actions that most people didn't find strange.

Yet the reason he didn't intervene was not simply because he judged it to be beyond his level. He knew all about how Yuder Aile

had defeated the monster alone, the injuries he sustained, and the risks his lord took to treat them.

The Knights from Pelleta who found out how blindly and strangely their lord behaved toward the Cavalry's new assistant were surprised, but Nathan Zuckerman's surprise was a bit special. He had been somewhat at a loss on how to treat Yuder Aile since then. For someone who always acted with clear standards, there had never been a more difficult time.

"Nathan."

Finally, Kishiar called his adjutant's name.

"Yes."

"Have you ever disliked receiving praise from me?"

Taken aback by the unexpected question, Nathan was rarely flustered but soon lowered his head, expressionless.

"There was none."

"Yeah. Usually, that's the case… Then what's the criteria, I wonder."

The last words were almost inaudible, but not enough to deceive the Swordmaster's ears. What did the word 'criteria' imply? As Nathan Zuckerman alone did not understand the will of his lord and remained silent, Kishiar softly exhaled and began to walk again.

"That wasn't what I intended to ask you. Forget what I just said."

"…Understood."

Nathan Zuckerman silently followed Kishiar again. Yet, inside the loyal Knight, the existence of Yuder Aile fell into a deeper labyrinth.

The next morning at breakfast, Pruelle, Ever, and Nathan Zuckerman joined them. Although each had met before, this was the first time they were all together, so the atmosphere was a bit awkward. But Kishiar, who had arranged this meeting, was simply composed.

“We need to start working in earnest, so it seems good to know exactly who is who among those who will be on our side. Thank you for responding so quickly to the dinner invitation I sent last night.”

“It’s nothing.”

Pruelle, who had settled separately in a chair with a small cat beside him, cheerfully bowed his head with a smile.

“Sir Aile. How’s your body? Did you get enough rest yesterday?”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

Yuder, sitting to the right of Kishiar, replied quietly. Ever, who was sitting next to him, finally opened her mouth with a slightly relaxed expression.

“I heard a little about the First Prince from the Commander when he came to assist with Yuder’s investigation, but I was really surprised. I never knew you were an Awakener.”

“Don’t be surprised just yet. This little one here is the same.”

Pointing at the cat with an unbelievably casual tone for a noble’s son, Pruelle smiled, and a question appeared in Ever’s eyes.

“Yes? Wasn’t it just a pet cat…?”

Despite several people entering, the cat that had kept its place quietly and without much tension, mewed as if answering.

“That adorable cat is Pruelle’s younger brother, Nipollen Van Tain. As you can see, an Awakener with the ability to transform into a cat.”

Ever, who had been wearing an expression that she couldn’t resist the cuteness of the cat since she first saw it, was deeply shocked.

“Originally, it’s afraid of people, but after confirming that it’s not very afraid of fellow Awakeners, we decided to take care of it. Prince Pruelle is soon to return to the capital.”

“Yes?”

“Your Highness and Sir Aile know that Nipollen is human, but I asked earlier for some more trustworthy people. When we tried it this time, Nipollen seemed fine even in the presence of many Cavalry members. I thought it might be an unreasonable request, but I’m grateful you kindly accepted.”

Pruelle stroked the little head of the cat and bowed his head in gratitude. Yuder recalled Pruelle, who had been with the cat when he returned from spending a night in jail, and thought he knew when the ‘test’ had been.

Ever repeated the word ‘yes?’ several times, but after hearing Pruelle and Kishiar’s explanations, she seemed to finally accept Nipollen’s true identity. Nathan Zuckerman, who found himself seated furthest from the cat, seemed content with understanding why, and showed no particular reaction.

“Then, today, at this gathering, we’ll discuss to some extent the upcoming operation,” announced Kishiar, changing the topic and turning his head towards Pruelle.

“Prince Pruelle brought some rather interesting news this morning.”

“Ah, yes.”

Pruelle, lifting his head, spoke with a smiling face.

“I believe you already know about the upcoming auction, but I have heard that at the same time, Baron Willhem is planning to host a charity party. That information was conveyed to me last night.”

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“If it’s a charity party… May I inquire precisely what kind of party it is?”

“It’s a party with the purpose of inviting nobles from various places in Tainu and the western region, to enjoy festivities and raise funds for the development of the West. My father, the Duke of Tain, commands Baron Willhem to host it irregularly.”

Listening alone, it was impossible not to see the blatantly obvious intentions of the Duke of Tain, who seemed to consider everything in the West as his own.

“I heard that last year, a similar party was held during an auction. At that time, guests from external merchants and the Willhem Family overlapped, and it was said to have been very chaotic.”

“…And since the end of last year’s auction, secretive ‘items’ have begun to reveal themselves, starting in the southern part of the Empire. New drugs, dangerous magic tools, even situations involving the beginning of illegal fight clubs trading foreign fighters.”

It was hardly a subtle coincidence. Kishiar gently added, with a look that suggested he did not believe it to be a coincidence at all.

“I believe that many of those who visited last year are likely to come again this year. Therefore, I am currently gathering information about those who came to Tainu during last year’s ‘party’ through those who provide me information.”

Among those who came last year, there were certainly those involved in secret trade and buyers, so if he could find them, he would be able to quickly obtain the necessary information by

comparing them with those coming this year. It was possible since Pruelle was of the bloodline of the House of Tain.

“Once the work is finished and I report to His Highness, I will return to the capital for a while. I’ll try to come back as soon as possible, but please take good care of my younger brother Nipollen in the meantime.”

Pruelle would immediately begin persuading the other forces within his family, including the rest of his siblings. What Yuder and the Cavalry needed to do was protect his precious youngest sibling, Nipollen, as promised, and grasp substantial evidence.

Having learned the extent of Pruelle’s involvement in this matter, Ever looked at the cat with newly responsible eyes and nodded.

“Understood. I will do my best to protect Prince Nipollen. Could you tell me what to be cautious of when dealing with Prince Nipollen before you leave, if it’s okay?”

“I was certainly planning to tell you separately… but it’s quite reassuring that you brought it up first.”

“Any Awakener who wants the protection of the Cavalry should naturally be cared for by me as a Deputy Commander. Feel free to tell me whenever.”

Pruelle’s eyes softened with relief. Yuder, looking at the rock-solid Ever, recalled her from his previous life.

‘I remember, she often took charge of the adaptation training when new members joined. Did she have the same thoughts back then?’

Among the few original members who stayed with him after he became Commander, there was always an awkward tension between Yuder and them that couldn’t be expressed in words.

Though they worked well together, that wall never disappeared until the end. Back then, even showing a bit of personal interest in each other was something unthinkable.

The realization that he knew how she would develop her abilities and how she would change, yet only now grasped this aspect, was slightly bitter.

“Information about Prince Nipollen will be shared only with those present here and the other two Deputy Commanders. If Kanna comes back later, I’d like you, Ever, to pass it on.”

“Understood.”

Upon hearing Ever’s reply, Kishiar wore a smile at the corner of his mouth and moved on.

“Based on the information received from Prince Pruelle, we will be extremely busy on the day of the auction and the party. The goal is to find out the whereabouts of the ‘objects’ that Duke Tain has hidden in Tainu by then, and to prevent all the Awakener groups targeting them. Currently, we plan to split into two groups…”

Could it have been because he momentarily recalled Ever’s previous life? Yuder felt a tingling sensation on the back of his hand as he watched Kishiar smoothly explaining the plan ahead. Now, gloves hid his hand and fingertips, but those smoothly moving lips had once touched them.

The kiss that started politely by lifting the other person’s hand and pressing down from the back of the hand to the fingertips often symbolized the ultimate affection. Typically, it was performed by those below to show respect, love, and acknowledgment to those above, but occasionally some monarchs paradoxically offered that kiss to their subjects. In any case, the act was never devoid of profound meaning.

It would have been better if they had kissed as usual. That would have been familiar. However, Kishiar had unabashedly lowered himself before Yuder. Even though he could understand why Kishiar had done so, the moment was so overwhelmingly emotionally painful. Perhaps it reminded him of a moment from his previous life.

Perhaps, a day like Yudrain Aile's appointment as the 2nd Cavalry Commander.

"…"

A fleeting memory from the past momentarily flowed through Yuder's mind and then vanished.

'What a useless thought…'

Afraid that his perceptive counterpart might notice, he looked down and turned his gaze, only to lock eyes with a cat on a chair. The cat slowly blinked its big eyes and wagged its tail's tip.

"…Finding the whereabouts of the objects involves going to Graham Willhem, and I think we'll need a little help from Prince Pruelle."

"If it's something I can help with, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Can you transform into Baron Willhem?"

Even as Yuder was lost in thought, the conversation flowed smoothly. Pruelle, hearing Kishiar's question, seemed to gauge something, closed his eyes, opened them, and then nodded enthusiastically.

"Of course, it's possible."

"You're confident it won't be noticed even by Graham, his brother?"

“That won’t be a problem either. But if the Baron appears elsewhere while I’m going to Graham, it might arouse suspicion among the lower-ranking people. That part may be a bit tricky.”

“I’ll take care of that.”

Kishiar’s answer was imbued with an unwavering solidity, as if he had already thought everything through.

“It seems that because of the story about the Divine Sword used to rescue Graham, the senior priests from the Western Sun God Temple have decided to visit here. It’s a private gathering, and the Baron will undoubtedly be present. You’ll go to Graham at that time. I’ll send Nathan to let you know the details.”

“Understood.”

After exchanging a few more words, the meal came to an end. Before leaving, Pruelle called Ever aside for a moment.

“Deputy Commander Beck.”

“Yes?”

“Actually, I have seen you at the Apeto Duchy trials held in the capital.”

Upon Ever’s response, indicating she didn’t understand what Pruelle was referring to with a ‘I see.’, Pruelle hesitated for a moment before awkwardly smiling.

“…There were those who secretly tried to harm the victims during a brief recess in the trial. I was really impressed when you caught them on the spot and threw them on the courtroom floor.”

“Ah… Yes. There was such a time. I didn’t know you saw me that day.”

Ever’s ears turned red as she trailed off at the end of her sentence. Yuder recalled the time when she had told a similar story during early morning training.

“I’m really glad to have the chance to meet you here, the person I saw back then. By chance, when His Highness told you about me, did he also mention what my hopes are?”

“No…”

“My dream is to join the Cavalry after this affair is settled. It’s my first dream, other than keeping my younger siblings safe. I wish I could stand with the Deputy Commander someday.”

Ever blinked a few times. It was quite astonishing for the heir closest to inheriting the dukedom to say such a thing, but shortly after, she shyly yet refreshingly nodded and smiled.

“Yes, I hope that happens for you. If you have the ability to transform, sadly, you’ll be going to the Steiber’s Sul Division instead of the Shin Division I’m in charge of.”

At that moment, Yuder saw a fleeting look of shock and disappointment flash like lightning over Pruelle’s face, who had been acting so cleverly.

“Is there a big difference depending on the division?”

“Uh, well…”

“Prince Pruelle, may I ask something?”

Yuder stepped in, interrupting Ever, who seemed to be contemplating how to respond to the unexpected reaction.

“Uh, sure, why not… What is it?”

“When I briefly visited the prison, it seemed like I found something related to the 4th underground floor. I was wondering if you knew anything about it.”

“The 4th underground floor?”

Pruelle finally recovered from his shock and turned his head. After hearing about Yuder’s discovery of the Tain family’s crest engraved on the wall on the 3rd underground floor, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“If the location matches the crest on the wall… there might be a high probability that the 4th underground floor actually exists.”

“So it does exist for sure?”

“According to the book I gave to His Highness, it was definitely designed to be there.”

Pruelle responded, recalling the memory.

“The first Duke Tain made that place after taking Tainu as his territory. It’s said that he frequently conducted research there, even during political affairs.”

Yuder’s eyebrows raised at the word “research,” and Pruelle quickly added:

“He was not well-known, but he was a mage. He was the disciple of the Archmage Luma. He didn’t act as a mage, so it’s mostly passed down as a record within the family… but there are records that Archmage Luma often visited Tainu to see him.”

Yuder didn’t know that the first Duke Tain was a mage. But Kishiar seemed to know, nodding and adding:

“Though he was the least talented of Luma’s disciples, he was acknowledged for his ability to research. What he researched is unknown now… but perhaps the reason the prison is so large is that it also served as a research facility.”

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Chapter 375

It was a startling revelation that the first Duke of Tain had been a mage, and had a connection with the Archmage Luma. If this was true, then there was one person close to Yuder who might know the existence of the fourth underground dungeon floor even better than Pruelle.

“…Is it true that the first Duke of Tain was Luma’s disciple?”

Enon, who had suddenly received a visit from Yuder, questioned back with a puzzled face. He had been in the midst of grinding herbs he had collected from somewhere.

“From what I know, all five of the Emperor’s children were disciples of Luma at that time. Of course, there were almost none who learned fully to the end, but…”

“He had no talent but showed aptitude in research. I heard that Luma frequently visited him here. Have you ever seen him?”

“Hmm…”

Enon added a handful of herbs into a small dish, furrowing his brow.

“No, Luma kept my existence a secret. After Luma left, I paid no personal attention to the royal family or nobles, focusing only on my duties.”

“Then the fourth underground dungeon floor might not exist either?”

“If it was in the design, the probability would be higher. Find a reliable mage and take him along with one of Tain’s lineages. If there

were Tain’s family crest, there might exist a device that only those with the blood connection can open.”

“There’s such a device?”

“It was quite a common protective device in the past. Blood doesn’t lie, after all.”

Enon answered nonchalantly but suddenly stopped his nervous grinding of herbs.

“…But if that dungeon was originally for research purposes, and the lowest floor was concealed to such an extent, that first Duke of Tain might have been researching something quite prickly.”

“Prickly?”

“Luma was secretly researching how to turn back time among other things, so why wouldn’t another guy do the same?”

Yuder slowly nodded his head. In any case, it seemed right that Duke Tain was Luma’s disciple, and if there was a high probability that the fourth floor existed, the ‘item’ that Duke Tain hid might also be there.

‘I must first find the fourth floor and check the presence of the item, and then look for traces of the first Duke of Tain or Luma.’

“Enon. When I go to find the fourth floor… do you have any thoughts of going as well?”

Asked in case, Enon sharply opened his eyes and turned his head.

“You… are you thinking of going there? Even when your body hasn’t fully healed yet?”

“No. It’s not that I’ll definitely go. But we have to find the fourth floor anyway.”

“If it’s necessary to protect the capital, maybe, but I won’t do anything dangerous in other places. I’m not a madman like you.”

Enon bluntly betrayed Yuder, then asked with a frowning face a moment later.

“More importantly, have you thought about what I told you?”

Yuder immediately knew what he meant. It was about a new ‘method’ to fully regain his strength, which Enon had told him about during a previous treatment.

“Hmm… I was actually going to hear more information and seek advice from the monster experts from Peletta that the Commander will meet today. You must come too, so get ready.”

“Monster experts? What’s that? I didn’t hear about it.”

Well, that would be the case. In fact, Yuder had come here to convey that story but he first asked about the Duke of Tain and the fourth underground floor.

“You heard it now, so it’s fine.”

“What’s fine about that?!”

The conversation ended with a familiar shout. Yuder, having received a scolding to speak quickly if he had business, set out with Enon. Kishiar, who was waiting in the reception room, found them and stood up with a smile.

“The assistant who went to call the pharmacist hasn’t returned for a while, so I was wondering what was going on. Shall we go now?”

“Yes.”

In the carriage waiting behind the mansion, only Nathan Zuckerman, holding a small box wrapped in black cloth, was already aboard. He silently nodded to Yuder and Enon, who had come with Kishiar, but did not move from his position guarding the box. Nobody was unaware that inside the box was a small Pethuamet captured from the Great Sarain Forest.

Since Kishiar naturally had Yuder sit beside him, Enon sat next to Nathan. Yuder could see from Enon's uncomfortable expression that he truly did not want to be there.

"You probably already know, but the people we're meeting today are from my territory, Peletta. One runs a small business, and the other is the only mage in Peletta Knights. They gladly came, showing great interest when I asked for help on this matter."

Kishiar explained that both were well-experienced in dealing with monsters, and there was no worry of secrets leaking. Both were people that Yuder did not know in his previous life.

"I didn't know there was a mage in the Peletta Knights."

"They hardly ever actually do anything. They're a bit different from other mages."

As they were talking, the carriage quickly stopped. A small house not far from Baron Willhem's mansion was their destination.

Ordinary-looking soldiers who looked like the Peletta Knights saluted Kishiar. Yuder was newly impressed by the tact with which everything had been thoroughly prepared so as not to draw attention to the visitors from Peletta.

"You've arrived, my lord. I thought this old neck of mine would fall off waiting."

“Haha, if you can still travel by carriage, then you’ll live healthily for another fifty years, Hellem.”

“What’s the use of living fifty more years? Still, I’m happy to see you in good health, my lord.”

The one who greeted them inside was an elderly woman dressed in mage robes. Her small body looked even smaller standing in front of the tall Kishiar, but the eyes beyond her glasses sparkled no less than a young person’s. Her gaze went from Nathan Zuckerman, who was holding the Pethuamet’s cage, to Enon, and finally stopped on Yuder. Yuder somehow felt that she was studying his face very closely.

“But… where is Shuden?”

“That guy was up all night doing who knows what, so he overslept today…”

“Ah, Grandma, don’t say it! Just wait a moment!”

A plaintive shout came from the second floor. Kishiar, understanding the situation, nodded and followed the mage to the place she had prepared. When Nathan Zuckerman placed the box containing the monster on the neatly cleared large table and unfolded the cloth, the old mage, who had been watching, suddenly smiled and spoke.

“Nathan. You seem taller. No one’s been bothering you?”

“…”

Nathan Zuckerman responded with silence, but the atmosphere momentarily soured. Kishiar, who burst into laughter, bowed his head in defense of his adjutant.

“It seems to you that Nathan is still like his younger self. But now, no one dares do that.”

“To my eyes, my lord, you don’t seem much different either.”

“Well, I suppose so.”

Kishiar, who answered briefly, turned to Yuder and Enon.

“Hellem was originally from the court mage lineage. When I had to leave for Peletta, she was considering her retirement, so I found a good place for her to retire at just the right time.”

“Speaking of retirement, he actually ordered me to work by his side until he died. Who would want to spend the rest of their life in such a cold and damp place? If monsters hadn’t appeared here, he would never have called me,” Hellem retorted, sticking out his tongue. Kishiar just laughed and did not refute the statement.

Yuder finally understood Kishiar’s words that she was ‘A bit different from other mages.’

‘If she comes from the court mage lineage… they must have known each other since childhood.’

He became more curious about her history, which he hadn’t seen in his previous life, but Hellem was a bit quicker to show curiosity toward Yuder.

“Hmm… Seeing your uniform, you must be the new assistant?”

“Yes. My name is Yuder Aile.”

“You look more robust than I heard. Much healthier than my own grandson.”

More robust than she’d heard? Where had she heard about him first? Although he had some guesses, it was the unfamiliar praise

that made Yuder more perplexed. Yuder kept his mouth shut, and Hellem chuckled before exchanging a few words with Enon.

Enon maintained his usual gruff and brusque demeanor, but Hellem did not show any discomfort at his attitude. Rather, a hint of affinity was visible in her face as she said, “I’ve heard that you wanted me to look at that monster.”

“It’s ready.”

Everyone’s gaze turned to the cage, now unveiled by Nathan Zuckerman, who had removed several layers of cloth that had been covering the Pethuamet. Yuder saw the small Pethuamet nibbling on vegetables within the magic-circle-drawn iron bars. It seemed a little plumper than when he’d seen it before leaving the great jungle, although he couldn’t be sure if it was just his imagination.

“That’s the monster. It’s truly a creature I’ve never seen before.”

Hellem, having pushed up her magnifying glasses, approached with great interest to examine the monster.

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“It moves on all fours, and it knows how to skillfully use its tail. A form that’s somewhere between a beast and an insect… According to what you sent me before, it seems like it’s hungry almost all day. Is that right?”

“That’s what they say.”

Kishiar replied, looking down at Pethuamet with an emotionless expression.

“It’s a relatively common characteristic among monsters that absorb magic. They move by absorbing a small amount of magic that dwells in all things, using it as a source of energy.”

As Hellem, who was circling around us examining Pethuamet, suddenly reached into her pocket and pulled out a glove. Yuder was startled and stepped forward, but Kishiar and Nathan remained calm.

“Is it okay?”

“The expert in this field is Hellem. It’s rare to find someone who’s been studying monsters for over 70 years and still has all limbs intact.”

“Leave me be. I was enjoying the concern of a handsome young man for a change.”

“Such a thing. You used to say that you didn’t care for Nathan’s and my concern, so it seems my assistant is to your taste? I’ve never lost to good looks, so this is a little disappointing.”

Kishiar raised an eyebrow and smiled slyly at Yuder.

“Hellem doesn’t compliment just anyone. It seems she quite likes the assistant.”

“…”

Yuder avoided answering. Enon, who had caught his eye, was grimacing more than before.

“Now, shall we start the collection?”

Hellem tapped Pethuamet’s head with her hand inside the cage. The monster, apparently angered by the interruption to its meal, let out a small threatening sound and whipped its tail, which had turned black. But the attack bounced off the glove, not causing any harm.

After repeating the same action a few times, Hellem deftly shook off Pethuamet, which had dangled from the end of the glove biting it, and turned away. Her expression, as she looked down at the glove smeared with the monster’s venom, was incredibly calm, as if she had done this hundreds of times.

“Now, let’s look at this side too.”

Hellem, having taken off the glove, approached Yuder.

“You’re tall, so it’s hard to examine you. Sit down here.”

“…Yes.”

Yuder sat down as instructed. Hellem, who had come close to Yuder’s left eye, lightly touched the top of her glasses. The ordinary-looking lens changed to a dark color, concealing her green eyes. As she fearlessly moved Yuder’s jaw this way and that, Yuder swallowed a strange and embarrassing feeling.

“The traces of the poison absorbed are not completely gone, indeed.”

Hellem, who had been peering into Yuder's unseen left eye, soon returned the lens color to its original state.

"I heard the monster follows you. Can I see it now?"

"Grandmother! You said to wait, but you've already gone through everything?!"

At that moment, someone ran down from the upper floor, huffing and puffing, and interrupted. The man, with his disheveled black hair like a bird's nest, was shameless even in the face of other people's stares. Looking at Pethuamet inside the enclosure, he quickly brightened and approached.

"Ah, you're the monster that even swallowed the magic circle, huh? Cuter than I thought?"

"Greeting your lord should be the priority."

Hellem frowned and spoke, and the man grumbled under his breath before turning around.

"Grandmother, it is Your Lordship, not mine. She always does this. Anyway… it's been a while, Your Highness. After hastily summoning me and making me wait for half a day, I had nothing to do but drink a little wine. I trust you'll overlook this much."

Despite an audacious attitude that was hard to believe, Kishiar rather smiled brightly.

"That's right. This one here is my assistant, Yuder Aile, and this one is Enon, a capable pharmacist of the Cavalry who's studying treatment methods for injuries caused by that monster. You can introduce yourself."

"Ah… Is this…?"

A man who had been staring intently at Yuder with eyes similar to Hellem's extended his hand for a handshake.

"I'm Mick Shuden. I run a trading company, and I've been of great assistance in business dealings with Duke Peletta. I don't particularly like being addressed formally, so please call me Mick."

Yuder slowly shook his hand, feeling a peculiar sensation.

'Shuden is the surname. …Mr. Shuden, who runs the trading company?'

When Kishiar had asked where Shuden was upon entering, the situation had passed too quickly for Yuder to think deeply about it. But upon hearing a proper introduction, strange suspicions arose when combined with his previously known profession.

Shuden, and the trading company.

The only place where those two overlapped was known to Yuder.

"…Excuse me, but what is the name of the trading company you run?"

The man, noticing Yuder's probing gaze, smiled knowingly.

"Why, of course, it's Shuden Trading Company."

Indeed. Yuder finally confirmed his identity.

Shuden Trading Company, despite its short history, had quickly become one of the famous trading companies on the continent, focusing on the trade of special luxury goods. Yuder had thought it necessary to recognize the connection when Kishiar had casually used the company's badge during a secret visit to meet Revlin at Apeto House.

He never expected to meet someone associated with that company in this manner.

‘I didn’t have time to pay attention to companies like that in my previous life…’

“It seems His Highness didn’t properly explain what I do?”

Mick Shuden cheerfully asked, apparently interpreting Yuder’s contemplative expression in his own way.

“…The Commander mentioned that you ran a small trading company, but it seems there was a misunderstanding.”

Kishiar, catching Yuder’s gaze, smiled faintly.

“Aha. Our company isn’t really that big, so I guess calling it small isn’t entirely wrong.”

Mick Shuden looked younger and more unbridled than one would expect for someone running a famous trading company. But the moment he looked around Pethuamet, his eyes completely changed.

“Really intriguing. To continuously eat and digest everything like this means it has good digestive ability, but… its body is small.”

“Its bodily fluids are all poison. It probably dissolves and digests with that, so it doesn’t need to be big.”

When Hellem, who was standing nearby, explained, Mick’s eyes sparkled, and he turned his head.

“Poison? You’ve collected some, haven’t you, Grandmother?”

“I have, but don’t think about stealing it. I won’t give it to you. You gather your own.”

“Oh, that’s mean. I’m not as skilled as you, Grandma. It’s hard for me.”

“I have no intention of helping a merchant.”

As Mick and Hellem exchanged words, Yuder discreetly asked Kishiar a question.

“How did you come to know the one who runs Shuden Trading Company?”

“Well, it’s a long story, but… I happened to help quite a bit at the beginning of Shuden Trading Company. We’ve been maintaining a friendly relationship ever since. Shuden is someone who has a keen interest in items made from monster by-products and has a wealth of related knowledge.”

That Kishiar had helped Shuden Trading Company at the beginning was truly unheard of.

‘… Such an old friendship, and yet he did not stand up for the Kishiar of his previous life.’

Even after his death, Shuden Trading Company remained silent all along. In fact, not only Shuden but everything associated with Kishiar had been quiet. The Peletta Knights, Nathan Zuckerman, everyone related to Peletta had dispersed quietly and obediently around Kishiar’s death.

The Emperor Katchian had no need to even lift a finger, such was the ease of victory, and previously there had been no need to think about what lay behind it. The remaining rebels who sensed defeat and did not diligently display loyalty, but instead fled, were a common occurrence in history. But now, memories that had seemed forgotten were somewhat revived, and things were different.

Would those around Kishiar have abandoned him so easily?

Apart from Nathan Zuckerman, he could see how wholeheartedly all the knights and others around him followed him. And yet, if they dispersed without any resistance, there must have been some reason for it.

Yuder suddenly thought of a hypothesis he had never entertained before, looking at Kishiar's smiling face.

'If all of this was according to Kishiar's own will.'

Before deciding whether it was possible to create a place of defeat for himself, surrounded by many who moved for him, or what the reason could have been if there was one, his head ached with annoyance.

"Hey, assistant. Weren't you going to show me that this monster follows you? I'm sorry I didn't let you do it previously. Can you show me now?"

Before the headache continued, a call broke his thoughts. Yuder slowly got up from his seat towards Mick and Hellem.

"… I'm not sure if it's possible now, but I will at least try."

In fact, there was nothing worth calling an attempt. What Yuder did at that time was just standing near Pethuamet's cage and moving his hand a little.

Yuder stood near the cage, looking down at Pethuamet just like before. Whether due to being tormented by Mick and Hellem's hands for a while, the little monster still had its tail raised, trembling.

Yuder slowly reached his hand toward the cage.

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Sensing the various gazes focusing on his fingertips, he touched the iron bars, and the monster made a small noise.

A moment later, Pethuamet slowly lowered its tail and approached in the direction where Yuder's hand was. The monster's reaction, sniffing at the iron bars as if smelling something, was the same as he had seen before.

Yuder moved his hand to the opposite side. Then, Pethuamet also turned its head and followed his fingertips. Seeing this, Hellem and Mick sighed simultaneously, like a sigh of admiration.

"It's amazing."

"It really responds."

"One who has the ability to read information told me that the monster felt Yuder as an entity like itself."

Kishiar, who had quietly approached behind Yuder, gently pulled him away, so they were a bit farther from the cage. His attitude was so subtle that no one thought it was intrusive.

"What do you two think?"

"Monsters move strictly according to instinct. This following reaction is undoubtedly the response of finding the same kind. Monsters that move in groups have a strong tendency to follow the direction of the one in front," Hellem opened her mouth first. She had certainly done extensive monster research for a long time and was much more knowledgeable than the mages of the Western Mage Union, not being astonished by the surprising phenomenon.

“According to my research, monsters react sensitively in various ways to the same species’ bodily fluids. It’s not strange that they recognize it as the same species if someone has absorbed toxic fluid,” Hellem added that it was fortunate that Pethuamet had the habit of moving in groups. If it had been a monster that showed hostility when meeting the same kind, it might have tried to attack Yuder specifically. Hearing this, Kishiar opened his mouth with a chilly smile.

“Yeah, if that had happened, maybe you wouldn’t have come this far.”

Following Hellem, Mick also began to share his thoughts.

“I think the same as Grandma. Many believe in the myth that objects made from monster by-products block monster attacks. There are actual cases of people mysteriously avoiding attacks. In that sense, this may be unfamiliar but it seems possible.”

Though not often recorded in history, Mick presented a few examples that he knew, which were definitely existing cases.

“I can’t guarantee whether this phenomenon will persist after the body heals, but in my opinion… even if you kill this monster right now, it doesn’t seem like it would be very detrimental to your Sir Aile’s physical condition or remaining injuries. What do you think, Grandma?”

“I think the same.”

The conclusion was quickly reached. But even afterward, Mick’s deep blue eyes remained fixed on Yuder for a while. It was a gaze that seemed similar to curiosity yet different.

‘Something… looks like peering inside.’

Unintentionally meeting that gaze for a moment, Yuder suddenly felt a familiar energy. It was a fleeting sensation, weak enough to be mistaken as an illusion, like the aura that Awakeners emit when using power, yet Yuder felt it very faintly from Mick before it disappeared. Yuder trusted his senses.

'…Was Mick Shuden an Awakener?'

He had never heard in his previous life that the head of the Shuden family was an Awakener. He wanted to ask, but Mick was quicker to open his mouth toward Kishiar.

"So, Your Highness, now that you have heard our opinions, what will you do?"

Yuder silently looked up at Kishiar's pale cheek, lost in thought. The deeper shadow of his long eyelashes on his cheek seemed to be contemplating whether to kill Pethuamet right away or not. But moments later, the red eyes that were gazing at Pethuamet's cage unexpectedly turned to Yuder.

"Yes. Now that we've concluded there's no remedy, there will be no problem with disposing of it. But… Weren't you assisting because you wanted to find out something more from it?"

Suddenly, the arrow was aimed at him. Yuder was inwardly perplexed but slowly opened his mouth.

"…How did you know?"

"Because it's not in your character to say to dispose of it only after being certain, unless there's something else."

Such quick wits while remaining quiet up until now were truly characteristic of Kishiar. It was a snake-like facet, one he hadn't felt in a while. Enon's eyes, not far away, subtly changed, turning into a

look that seemed to desperately want to pry into something, but Yuder avoided that gaze and opened his mouth.

“…Well, yes. I did think that I wanted to find out in more detail how the power of that monster is exerted, but I wanted to tell you that I also oppose disposing of it right away for other reasons.”

“What reason is that?”

“Enon has been thinking about it while observing the monster,” Yuder said, speaking for Enon.

“That monster has the ability to absorb magic power through toxic fluids, and he speculated that I might be able to utilize the same ability since I’ve absorbed it.”

To go into more detail, the power of the red stone absorbed by Yuder would probably be related, but he decided not to talk about that here.

“If I can find a way to absorb the toxicity that doesn’t completely disappear from my body, rather than forcibly removing it, I think it would be good as I can also find out what I want….”

“Does that mean… you intend to activate the remaining toxicity in your body?”

Hellem carefully asked. Then, Enon, who had been stepping back until now, took a step forward and replied.

“The remaining toxicity is small, but I judged it to be in a state where it cannot be forcibly removed even with divine power because it has become excessively adapted to the body. Detoxifying poison means adapting it to the body. Since that guy has recovered a lot of energy and is strong enough to withstand the remaining toxicity with his original power, isn’t it worth a try?”

“To do that, you’ll have to use the monster’s blood; is that what you’ve thought about and said?”

Enon nodded at Hellem.

“Anyway, the reason that monster was dangerous wasn’t the toxicity itself but the strange amplification circle created by the Western mages. If he had been covered with the blood of a monster who hadn’t swallowed the amplification, I would have been able to get rid of it before it was absorbed into his body.”

But reality hadn’t turned out that way. So, Enon suggested discussing this method by taking on a slight risk. Yuder thought the method was quite reasonable, but they needed to hear the opinions of experts, including the mages, to implement it.

“Hmm. This is a solution I haven’t thought of at all.”

Mick stroked his lips slowly, showing a subtle smile.

“But since it’s an unprecedented challenge to remove the toxicity that couldn’t be completely eradicated even with magic and has fully attached to the body, perhaps we should try to that extent. Grandmother, what do you think?”

“It could be dangerous.”

Hellem answered in a heartbeat.

“Yes, it may be dangerous, but it’s not impossible. And the one who knows and can handle that level of danger best is the grandmother. If the assistant must live the rest of his life with one blind eye, I think His Highness will be greatly disappointed. Why not give it a try?”

Hellem did not respond easily. Yuder subtly intervened between them.

“If you don’t feel like it, that’s fine. I’m grateful enough for you coming here and taking a look.”

It was a sincere remark, but Hellem looked at Yuder with an exceedingly pitiful expression. After examining Yuder’s left eye, she sighed and eventually nodded her head.

“Alright, I understand. Will you help too?”

“If it’s something I can do, I’ll certainly help.”

Mick answered coolly, squinting his eyes.

“That’s why we came here in the first place. Besides, with that pharmacist there, we might finish sooner than expected. He doesn’t seem to have an ordinary mind.”

“…”

Lines deepened on Enon’s brow, but he did not spit out words of refusal to participate.

“So, this is our opinion. Now it’s up to His Highness to decide.”

Hearing Mick’s words, Kishiar’s gaze turned towards Yuder. Without words being exchanged, it was clear what he was asking.

Instead of answering, Yuder faintly nodded. Emotions that had briefly flickered in Kishiar’s red pupils were quickly gathered and disappeared. Composing his feelings, he returned to his usual decisive countenance, akin to that of Duke Peletta.

“Hellem, if you are to take responsibility for this part, how much time and manpower will be needed?”

“I need no more manpower. More people won’t necessarily be better for this job, don’t you know? As for preparations, it will be over with just one monster.”

And, of course, Yuder, the subject, would also be needed.

“Anyway, I will attempt it, concerned about the bright future of this young man you’ve brought. If it seems too dangerous, I will withdraw.”

“That’s why I trust you, Head Mage.”

“When did I retire that you still call me that? Wouldn’t it be better to call me former Head Mage?”

“Even if you’ve forsaken your title, your achievements haven’t disappeared, have they? If we’re to embark on this journey, it’s only fair that others know more about who you are.”

“…No one can beat you in words, My Lord.”

Hellem clicked her tongue, glancing at Yuder and Enon. Still, she seemed to agree with Kishiar’s words, introducing herself properly once again.

“I was once called Hellem Caspirl, but since retiring, I’ve given up both title and surname, and now I’m simply Mage Hellem.”

Yuder was secretly very surprised.

‘…Not just a court mage, but the former Head Mage?’

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Initially, Yuder had thought that perhaps there was a reason that made it difficult to publicly reveal Hellem's surname, only introducing her first name. However, this situation far exceeded Yuder's expectations. If she were the head of the Imperial Magic Department of the Orr Empire, her skills would be on par with the Elder Archmages at the top of the Pearl Tower.

In an era when most mages found it difficult to cast even a single spell, not everyone was so constrained. Some of the Elders in the Pearl Tower Yuder had met in his previous life knew how to use impressively powerful elemental magic.

Yuder had also considered the possibility that, like Thais Yulman, the expert on monsters, Hellem might have been granted a high position due to her outstanding research ability. However, unlike the several Elders in the Pearl Tower, there was only one position for the head of the Imperial Magic Department. No matter how excellent her research skills might have been, it would not have been enough for her to obtain that position.

The fact that someone who had once held the prestigious title was now living in seclusion in remote Peletta, hiding both her honor and surname and being content with merely being called "grandmother," was hard to believe. However, the calm reactions of Mick Shuden and Nathan Zuckerman made it seem all the more real.

Anyway, it was fortunate that Hellem said that neither much time nor manpower was needed for preparation. Yuder was determined to use this opportunity to find not only the key to recovering his own body but also a solution to the issue related to Kishiar's vessel.

“Since we’re on the subject, let’s start today. Pharmacist, it seems like you’ll have to be with us. Is that okay?”

Enon sighed softly but did not refuse Mick’s cheerful words.

“Call me Enon, not ‘Pharmacist’.”

“Alright, Enon. That’s as refreshing as your revolutionary idea for treatment.”

Nathan Zuckerman left early to prepare to leave, and Kishiar engaged in conversation with Hellem. As everyone else moved, Yuder’s gaze once again met Mick’s. In his eyes, there seemed to be a fleeting glimpse of a mirage-like energy.

“… I didn’t get to ask earlier, but are you an Awakener?”

“Oh. How did you figure it out so quickly when my power isn’t even visible? Indeed, a person with the ability worthy of a hero of the Great Sarain Forest is different in every way.”

“I’m naturally a bit sensitive to energy.”

Responding calmly, Yuder lowered his voice so that only Mick could hear.

“I don’t know what ability you possess, but I’m feeling uneasy as I sense energy every time you look at me.”

“Did you feel that? It’s not just a little sensitivity. That’s impressive.”

Mick sincerely admired Yuder and then obediently answered.

“My ability allows me to look inside others. Since it’s activated through my eyes, it’s not easy to control. If something bothers me, I unintentionally exert my power. Sorry if it was unpleasant.”

“…Inside? You mean organs? Or energy?”

“Hahaha. Although I can see energy to some extent, it’s neither of those. How should I describe it?”

The man who had been scratching his head looked at Yuder once again with renewed intensity, and this time a mirage visibly flickered around his eyes.

“What I see is, let’s say… like the core inside the shell? But your core is quite unique. The most special one I’ve ever seen among all the people I’ve met.”

What could be so peculiar to be considered the most unique among all the people he had seen so far? Unable to understand, Yuder furrowed his brow slightly, to which Mick quietly said,

“There are many holes inside you. So many empty spaces that they’re countless.”

A powerful throb resonated somewhere deep within his chest. Surprise and caution raised their heads simultaneously inside Yuder. Suppressing a chilling sensation, Yuder made an effort not to reveal any change in expression and sealed his lips without a word.

“…”

“Well, it doesn’t mean it looks dangerous. Since I haven’t looked into the hearts of everyone in the world, there might be someone with even stranger contents than you, assistant. Perhaps your power is too strong or it may be an aftereffect of an injury, so don’t worry.”

After cheerfully spitting out words of comfort or something, Mick patted Yuder’s shoulder.

“I want to hear directly from you about the monster you caught in the Great Sarain Forest next time we meet. In fact, that’s one of the

things I've been looking forward to most?"

"…Understood."

Despite Yuder's curt response, Mick was delighted.

"Great, great. I must prepare some fine wine for that day. I'll treat you in a manner worthy of Shuden's name."

Both Mick and Hellem were unique in many ways. That fact had made Kishiar feel slightly strange in a meeting he never had in his previous life, even among his own people.

Still, it was not a bad feeling.

…

On the way back to the mansion after leaving Enon, Kishiar quietly informed Yuder of the next schedule.

"I will prepare to meet with Baron Willhem and the priests of the Western Sun God Temple as soon as I return. I'm thinking of including Priest Lusan, can you summon him?"

"Understood."

It was a good thing, as Yuder had to hear about Marty and Robel from Lusan. Upon arrival, Yuder went to find Lusan but stopped in his tracks at the unexpected sight of Robel, who was caring for the memory-lost ones.

'He was helping out here.'

He hadn't expected Robel's assistance, even though some members who were helping Lusan were absent for other tasks. The two people who noticed Yuder's gaze turned their heads and approached with welcoming expressions.

“Master Yuder, what brings you here?”

“The commander wants to see Priest Lusan. But… what’s going on here? Is it a positive outcome?”

Lusan managed an awkward smile, although Yuder’s vague expression referred to Robel and Marty’s situation.

“Ha-ha… No, it’s rather the opposite, so we’ve decided to seek this gentleman’s assistance.”

‘…The opposite?’

Robel, who met Yuder’s gaze, made a bitter expression. Lusan explained on his behalf.

“Marty has responded that she doesn’t want to see Robel right now. She seems quite confused after hearing Robel’s situation, so we decided to give her more time to think.”

“I see.”

“…But thankfully, Master Yuder, or rather, Mr. Yuder, you warned us first. If I had heard without any preparation, really… I wouldn’t have known how to respond.”

Robel interjected softly and then looked at the closed door. It was the room where those who had regained their memories were staying.

“I’ve decided to keep waiting since all I can do is wait. But I couldn’t do nothing, so I asked to help the Priest, who needed assistance.”

His response was clear, even if weak. The fact that he hadn’t given up everything despite Marty’s rejection was positive. Lusan

seemed to think the same and continued to look at Robel as he spoke.

“Although those who have lost their memories don’t recognize Mr. Robel, facing a familiar face seems to help with a quicker recovery, so I accepted. However, I’m being careful not to let him encounter Marty or others who have regained their memories.”

“That should be fine.”

Yuder nodded, expressing his intention to fully respect Lusan’s judgment.

“But I won’t just keep working. When you go to look for Nahan, please take me with you.”

“Have you had any contact from that side since you came here?”

“No, not at all. I heard that he left his usual lodging and fled, but I have no idea where he might have gone next. I’m sorry I couldn’t be of help even though I promised to cooperate.”

Robel’s eyes were filled with anger as he spoke. It seemed that capturing Nahan was his only revenge and atonement toward Marty.

“…Then, Robel, as I said earlier, please feed everyone here and then turn the wheelchairs in the direction. Yuder and I will be back shortly.”

Lusan looked at Robel with a touch of regret before instructing the remaining tasks and turning with Yuder. They headed in the direction of the lodging where Kishiar might be, chatting along the way.

“Robel has been very cooperative. He wanted to help more from the first time we spoke. He’s apprehensive about the Cavalry, but he doesn’t seem hostile.”

“That’s fortunate.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Yuder.”

Lusan casually praised Yuder, but from Yuder’s perspective, Lusan’s attitude was even more admirable. Even though things had improved, having the mental strength to act so magnanimously toward an Awakener who was part of the group that had harmed him, like Nahan, was an impossible feat for an ordinary mind.

“Ah, and quite a few letters have been delivered from the Great Sarain Forest and the capital… There might be a letter for you, Yuder, so check it later. I got one too.”

“Is that so? I’ll have to check.”

He had previously written a brief reply to the letter sent by his colleagues left in the Great Sarain Forest. It was about time for a response to start trickling back in.

In the lodging to which Yuder and Lusan returned, besides Kishiar and Nahan Zuckerman, there was one more guest. The guest stood up and smiled warmly at Yuder as soon as he saw him.

“It’s been a while.”

It was none other than the head of the Western Mage Union, Micalin Punt.

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Chapter 379

“It’s a relief to see you looking much healthier than the last time I saw you. I’m truly glad.”

Micalin, whom Yuder met again in Tainu, looked much cleaner and neater than when he stayed in Great Sarain Forest. He repeatedly expressed his relief at seeing Yuder.

“It’s fortunate to see you looking well too, Leader. How did you get here?”

“He was invited for what’s happening today.”

The answer came from Kishiar, who was sitting behind Micalin.

“Despite agreeing to verify the divine sword in a private setting, Baron Willhem kept making excuses and wanting to increase the attendees, so I suggested calling the Western Mage Union, who have been instrumental in maintaining security in the West.”

It was clear what the Baron was after. He wanted to escalate matters, hoping to increase his influence if Kishiar was proven to be lying, all the while refusing to give up his base ambitions despite bowing his head for the Star of Nagran. It was remarkable.

Kishiar had no reason to back down, as the sword he possessed was the real divine sword, and he was its true master. However, he subtly provoked the Baron’s pride and drew in the Western Mage Union and Micalin.

The Baron had thought that the Western Mage Union would not accept the request, but surprisingly, Micalin accepted it at once upon seeing the letter.

“I didn’t want to go to Baron Willhem’s mansion, but if I can help His Highness, the rewards will more than justify it.”

“That’s enough.”

“Thank you for saying so. The help we can offer is simply maintaining neutrality and judging the matter fairly on site… I promise to proclaim the truth we witness today, without a shred of falsehood, to everyone in the West with full honor.”

Seeing the confident smile of the elder mage, Yuder realized that Kishiar’s reason for drawing the Western Mage Union was not merely due to old grudges between them and Baron Willhem.

‘The influence of the Mage Union in the West seems greater than I thought.’

And that made sense. Having handled dangerous tasks like controlling monsters in the West for Baron Willhem for several years, they must have had rapport with many people.

‘They must be pleased to not only repay our past kindness but also take revenge against Baron Willhem, who had dared to trample the mage’s pride.’

The comprehensive research support that the Western Mage Union was to receive from Kishiar must have also positively influenced this refreshing decision.

Micalin’s attitude, clearly different from before just by his immediate visit to see Kishiar upon arrival, was noticed. Recalling his unpleasant expression in Great Sarain Forest, Yuder thought he seemed quite pleased today and allowed himself a faintly cold smile.

Baron Willhem might think that just the Western Mage Union alone wouldn’t be able to do anything. But that would be something he would learn when it actually happened.

While Yuder was lost in thought, Kishiar's gaze shifted to Lusan beside him.

"Priest Lusan. The priests visiting today are coming to verify the authenticity of my Divine Sword Orr and whether I am its real master or not. Do you know that?"

"Ah, yes. I heard."

Lusan nodded with a slightly tense face.

"I trust the priests Baron Willhem will bring, of course, but your divine power is needed to provide more concrete evidence. The more powerful the priest, the more helpful it will be, but no matter how I think about it, there doesn't seem to be anyone better than you."

The explicit compliment made Lusan's ears turn red. He tightly gripped the wooden emblem around his neck and nodded.

"If there's anything I can help with, I'll do it!"

"Thank you. In that case… Nathan."

"Yes."

Nathan Zuckerman, the last to catch the lord's eye, stepped forward.

"Please inform the Tain First Prince that I may be a little late for dinner tonight, and ask for his understanding."

"Understood."

Nathan Zuckerman casually said goodbye and went outside. That conversation was a kind of signal. Yuder recalled the command that Kishiar had given to Pruelle van Tain during the previous meeting.

When Kishiar met privately with the priests of the Sun God and Baron Willhem, he would transform into the Baron to meet his brother Graham Willhem and gather information.

Sending Nathan Zuckerman was to notify Pruelle of the start time and protect him at the same time.

Kishiar got up leisurely, like a predator anticipating the long-awaited hunt. The divine sword hanging at his waist was still wrapped in thick cloth. Yuder began to walk behind him.

Today's meeting was strictly private, so even the servants in the mansion didn't know what was happening. Kishiar headed towards a small chapel located behind the main house, following a path where Baron Willhem had previously sent the servants away.

Already there, three elderly priests dressed in priestly garments and Baron Willhem were waiting for them.

"I greet Your Grace, Duke Peletta."

"The eternal light of radiance, may warm righteousness always be with you."

The three priests were renowned figures leading the Sun God's temple in the western region. Born and raised nobly, their necks and hands were adorned with precious gems and gold and silver emblems like jewelry.

After introducing themselves and finishing the greetings, their eyes moved unanimously to the sword at Kishiar's waist. A sense of tension filled the air, and Baron Willhem stepped forward.

"Your Highness, is that sword the Divine Sword Orr?"

"It is."

At Kishiar’s stoic answer, the elderly priests all inhaled sharply.

“But why have you covered it with cloth?”

“The scabbard is too flashy, and it hurts my eyes a little. Well, I suppose I should uncover it to verify?”

Kishiar nonchalantly untied the cloth that bound the scabbard, under the gaze of everyone present. Slowly revealed, the large and small magical stones and the beautiful patterns created with powdered gems began to appear on the scabbard.

“Oh… My God.”

As if witnessing something deeply awe-inspiring, one of the priests exclaimed excessively. Another priest looked closely at the sword, with eyes that still couldn’t entirely erase doubt.

‘It probably looks suspicious, appearing to be a mere ornamental sword.’

The divine sword had been left neglected in a corner of Peletta Castle for quite some time without meeting its owner, Kishiar. It was famous as the sword of the First Emperor, but even the priests wouldn’t have known much about it unless they had had an exceptional interest in the sword.

Still, thanks to the tales that unauthorized touch could bring misfortune, no one dared to reach out to it. Kishiar, noticing Baron Willhem’s doubtful look, smiled and slowly grabbed the handle of the sword.

“I don’t seem to enjoy drawing it for no reason, but today is the day, so even the Divine Sword Orr will understand.”

The well-maintained blade slowly emerged from the scabbard. The priests and Baron Willhem all stared with narrowed eyes and

tense expressions, but no other change occurred.

“…”

One of the priests who had maintained silence cautiously opened his mouth.

“It appears… quite impressive.”

“Naturally. I sharpened it well this morning.”

Kishiar replied playfully, twisting the sword this way and that to show it off.

“Can you feel it? The power of the divine sword.”

The priests looked at each other with somewhat bewildered expressions. They seemed to have expected the power or mark of the divine sword to reveal itself merely by looking at it, but their faces betrayed their perplexity when this did not happen. After a moment, one of the priests stepped forward and spoke.

“I must apologize, Your Highness. By sight alone, we cannot feel the divine power, and verification seems difficult. Could you perhaps show us that mighty and divine force that was felt even outside the Great Sarain Forest?”

“Hmm… Actually, that might be a bit difficult. Whether it was due to using the sword’s power excessively in that dangerous situation or something else, regrettably, I have not fully recovered yet. You know I’m famous for being frail, don’t you?”

Their eyes all turned in unison to the face of the man, smiling, a head taller and broader in shoulders. However, the fact that the Duke of Peletta had been sickly and bedridden for a long time was known to everyone, so no one said a word.

“So I want to prove it in another way.”

“What would that be?”

“Could one of you infuse this sword with divine power?”

“What?”

“A sword bestowed by God can manifest its aura more powerfully than other swords, and it responds to the power of God. To infuse it with divine power, there’s no need to actually touch the sword. If you provide enough force, confirmation should be possible.”

“Ah…”

The faces of the three elderly priests changed simultaneously into various colors.

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Chapter 380

Yuder thought he understood the reason why the priests hesitated, looking at each other with faces filled with uncertainty.

‘I’m reminded of Bertrail Shand Apeto.’

Though his divine power was not of a significant level, he was a man who had risen to the position of one of the twelve Elder Priests solely because he came from one of the four great ducal families. Although he had long since passed away, there were still many like him within the temple.

But just because such occurrences were common did not mean they were not shameful.

The reason Kishiar had mentioned Lusan’s divine power and had him attend this gathering was all for this very moment.

“Then… I’ll go first.”

After some time of exchanging hesitant glances about who should go first, one of the priests stepped forward, his face displaying discomfort. Perhaps worried that even the hem of his garment might touch the divine sword, he stretched his hand from as far away as possible.

As he began to mumble a prayer, white divine power started to flow. The faintness of it was laughable, not even coming close to the level of divine power Lusan usually exhibited, and only half as strong as what Kishiar could produce. What’s more, because he sent his power from a distance, the light that actually reached the sword was negligible.

“Wouldn’t it be better to come a bit closer?” Kishiar kindly suggested, looking at the sword that had not changed at all. But the light emitted by the priest abruptly stopped at that moment.

“Oh dear.”

“…I apologize.”

The priest tried a few more times to gather his strength but no more light came forth. He withdrew dejectedly, and the second priest stepped forward. Although he bravely approached the divine sword, unfortunately, the amount of divine power he could produce was much less than the first priest’s. Even after struggling and squeezing out his divine power, the divine sword showed no reaction.

The third priest was a man who had been standing near Baron Willhem, continuously eyeing Kishiar with suspicion.

“I regret to say that I’ll need a little preparation before I begin.”

It wasn’t a question of whether it was okay to prepare; it was merely a polite announcement.

The third priest then drank two bottles of a special holy water made for the priests, excusing that his health had deteriorated due to being busy with temple affairs recently, and that gathering strength seemed to be difficult.

“Huueeugh…!”

However, despite the effect of the holy water, the divine power he produced was the weakest of the three.

‘A candle on the verge of going out would be brighter than that.’

The other two priests hastily averted their eyes, as if finding it difficult to watch his earnest and strained efforts. Embarrassed,

flushed necks were visible in between their pained sounds. Baron Willhem bit his lip, and Micalin, who had been quietly observing, couldn't help but cough to hide his laughter.

"Priest Futo, perhaps that's enough for now."

Micalin, who had barely suppressed his laughter, spoke with difficulty, causing the third priest to bow his head.

"I can still do more. It's just that the speed at which the divine power is coming out is much slower than usual."

"I understand how hard it is to exert strength in an unhealthy state, even as a mage. Speaking as someone who admires Priest Futo's excellent sermons, please don't take my concerns the wrong way."

Micalin soothed the other party with remarkable skill. Only after being cajoled several times did the third priest finally, yet reluctantly, withdraw his hand.

"I am still fine, but since the Head Mage is so worried, I suppose I have no choice."

Though he tried desperately to appear composed, he couldn't hide the sweat that burst forth from his face, nor his trembling hands. As he was about to withdraw his hand, Baron Willhem twisted his lips into a smirk and raised his voice.

"Ah, how can this be? Despite accepting the divine power of three excellent priests, there's no change in the divine sword… I don't know what to think."

"I'm just as surprised," Kishiar said, calmly nodding in agreement.

As Kishiar played along, Baron Willhem twitched his lips momentarily before opening them with a feigned worried expression.

“Your Highness, have you ever previously confirmed the information that the divine sword reacts to divine power?”

“Do you wish to say that I lied?”

“Far from it, Your Majesty. I’m just concerned that if the information you have isn’t something you’ve confirmed yourself, but rather something known through old records, there might be a possibility that the records were mistaken.”

Although his explanation was long, in short, he meant that the three priests’ divine power wasn’t the problem; the suspicion lay with the divine sword.

“How fortunate we are to be the only ones here. If others knew about this, imagine how surprised and worried they would be…”

Despite the Baron’s skill in steering the conversation in a direction unfavorable to Kishiar, Kishiar merely smiled.

“Indeed. It’s a valid concern. I’ve always been deeply impressed by the Baron’s loyalty.”

“Not at all. In this situation, anyone would…”

“But don’t worry. There are three priests here, are there not?”

“Yes?”

“High Priest Lusan. Come here.”

Baron Willhem knew that the only priest in the Cavalry was also scheduled to attend with Kishiar today. And he had long since heard through his servants that the priest was an utterly ordinary young initiate. He didn’t give it much thought.

But for some reason, the wooden holy symbol around the young priest’s neck, his thick green hair carelessly tied back, made Baron

Willhem suspicious and uneasy.

“Would you be able to prove it by pouring divine power over this sword?”

“Of course.”

Lusan approached the sword without hesitation. Without reciting a prayer or drinking holy water, he simply raised his hand.

And a moment later, a bright white light poured out from his hand like a waterfall, literally covering the blade of the divine sword.

“…”

The three elder priests couldn’t hide their shock. Even Baron Willhem closed his mouth. After pouring out the light for a long time, Lusan pulled back his divine power with an unlabored face, and as if it had been waiting, a new light gently rose above the silver blade. Moments later, it shimmered, lifting beautiful characters like a sentence above the blade.

“That’s from the scripture…!”

Someone among the elder priests muttered unconsciously. Someone else staggered back. In front of the pure and powerful divine power that no one could doubt, Yuder too felt an overwhelming sensation.

This was the first time he had felt such a dense and unique divine power. It was completely different from the divine power that the priests emitted for healing, yet even more astonishing was the fact that he could feel that it was essentially the same. Lusan also looked surprised, but he soon knelt down, joined his hands, and assumed a praying position.

A long time passed, but the light did not easily show signs of dimming. Kishiar clicked his tongue as he pushed the sword back into its scabbard. For some reason, the sword seemed to resist going in, emitting an even stronger light, but when its master shoved it in without hesitation, all its energy instantly ceased as if it had never existed. Only then did the sound of relieved breaths come from the direction of the elder priests.

Kishiar, looking down at it indifferently, sheathed the sword at his waist and spoke.

“Do you believe now?”

No one dared to open their mouths.

Baron Willhem, and the three elder priests, simply maintained their stunned expressions.

“I won’t expressly forbid mentioning what was seen today. If there is someone who worries excessively again, let them remember that it is tantamount to doubting the God. Please convey that to them.”

His red eyes swept over Baron Willhem’s parched face, warningly.

“Baron Willhem, I can trust and ask this of you, can’t I?”

The look was intensely affectionate, yet at the same time, chillingly cold. Baron Willhem, feeling a strange chill running down his back, finally managed to open his dry mouth.

“…Yes, Your Highness.”

“I too will never forget the honor of witnessing this holy miracle and will pass it on.”

Micalin followed with a respectful salute, placing his hand over his chest. Yuder saw for the first time since meeting Micalin Punt, a look of pure happiness on his face.

“And you?”

The elder priests, receiving Kishiar’s gaze, also bowed their heads. The priest who seemed friendly with Baron Willhem answered with a voice as small as a mosquito’s, appearing to want to maintain his pride, but the other two showed a demeanor incomparably more subdued than before.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Baron Willhem’s defeat was as clear as day, beyond doubt to anyone who saw. Yuder looked at the magnificent figure of the man, proudly standing even with the splendid sheath of the divine sword revealed, and unexpectedly felt his heart pound.

The new master chosen by the Divine Sword Orr.

This time, that sword would not lose its master.

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Chapter 381

“Today, what I witnessed was truly a miracle. My heart still has not settled. To see with my own eyes the divine power of the divine sword… I thought I was witnessing a page from the founding legends.”

“How embarrassing.”

On the way out, after leaving behind Baron Willhem and the priests, Micalin endlessly showered Kishiar with praise he had been holding back. Seeing Kishiar’s face show no sign of embarrassment, Micalin, with an excited face, turned his flood of compliments towards Lusan, who was following them.

“That’s right. The young Priest’s divine power was also truly remarkable. To have such potent divine power at such a young age… The Temple has surely missed a great talent. Heh heh.”

“What? I haven’t really done anything…”

Lusan, taken aback as the conversation suddenly turned towards him, didn’t know what to do with himself, prompting the elder mage to shake his head.

“What are you talking about? Do you know that after our union’s mages saw you, they have been rushing to the Temple to offer worship? Everyone will be very pleased to know what happened today.”

“If it weren’t for Priest Lusan’s exceptional abilities, proving the power of the divine sword would have been very difficult. Anyone would know that, so don’t be too modest.”

“Ah, thank you.”

When Kishiar also joined in, Lusan's ears turned red.

"I don't think I should hear such grand praise, since my divine power only increased after what happened in Great Sarain Forest… but I'm glad I could help both of you."

It was a bit surprising to learn that Lusan's divine power had increased after the events in Great Sarain Forest, but on the other hand, it also made sense.

'After using her divine power extensively and honing it in Great Sarain Forest, it would naturally grow.'

Lusan's reputation would probably join that of the Cavalry in the gossip mill, and it was a sure bet.

With a face freshened as years of frustration were relieved, Micalin turned to Kishiar, who casually asked a question as they walked by.

"By the way… do you know anything about Baron Willhem's charity party that supposedly took place last year?"

Micalin tilted his head at the sudden question.

"The party that the Baron occasionally throws to wring out money? After being fooled in the first year we established our headquarters in Tainu, I haven't attended again, so I don't really know. But why are you curious about that?"

A party to wring out money. Considering the information about the party he had heard from Pruelle, there could be no more accurate expression.

"It's supposed to happen again soon, so I was just wondering."

“At such a chaotic time? I’ve long known he had neither thought nor conscience, but he always surpasses expectations. The unprecedented situation of closing the city gates has barely passed, and now this!”

Micalin harshly criticized Baron Willhem. He spat out words filled with resentment like a machine gun, then belatedly collected himself and examined Kishiar’s complexion.

“Ah, if Your Highness wishes me to attend, I will try to do so, but…”

“That’s fine. More importantly, the cooperation on security with the Western Mage Union and the matters concerning Great Sarain Forest are far more vital. Make sure to handle those things when you get back.”

“Yes, of course. Don’t worry about either matter.”

The elder mage gladly responded. After he left and Lusan went on his way to take care of those who had lost their memories, Yuder finally opened his mouth, which had been shut all this time, to ask a question.

“You’ve decided to cooperate with the Western Mage Union on security?”

“Yes. We discussed it when he came to see me earlier. Fortunately, he seemed very cooperative.”

Maintaining the peace of Tainu, calming the confusion of the people, and searching for the Star of Nagran required not only the cooperation of the few mages and the Peletta Knights but also many others. If the Western Mage Union decided to follow Kishiar and the Cavalry, things would have been much easier.

“Thank goodness.”

“Yes. It was good that they arrived just in time. Speaking of which, I wonder if Nathan conveyed the message properly to Pruelle…”

Kishiar’s gaze shifted to the mansion not far away. Somewhere deep within, Graham Willhem was likely to be dwelling.

A fleeting sharpness, like that of a beast eyeing its prey, passed over his red eyes and then vanished. With an unbreakable determination, one that one could hardly attribute to the person who had just demonstrated the power of the divine sword, he was immediately calculating the next task and the tasks that would follow.

“…I’m looking forward to dinner tonight.”

“So am I. Indeed, there’s no one who understands me as well as my assistant.”

The two exchanged a similar smile.

“I was able to hear quite a few things from Graham.”

That evening, when Pruelle appeared at dinner with Nathan Zuckerman, he reported the success of their plan as soon as he sat down.

“It was a bit of a struggle at first since he was out of his mind from the drugs, but I believe the information is reliable.”

“He must have been terrified by the memories of that day. Well, it’s understandable.”

Kishiar replied, cutting his meat.

“Yes. Luckily, he seems to have forgotten that I asked him anything. Even if he talks to the real Baron Willhem later, it seems there’s no risk of today’s events being exposed.”

“So, what did he know?”

“According to Graham, the most important ‘items’ are divided and placed in a secret building connected to the basement of the consortium building and another location. He managed the items in the consortium building, and it seems that Baron Willhem managed the others.”

‘Just as I thought.’

The unsettling behavior of Graham, who seemed to have hidden something in the basement of the consortium building he claimed was empty, and the soldiers who unusually patrolled the nearby entertainment district often. He had predicted it to some extent, but the connection was finally clearly revealed.

“Did you ask what items are there?”

“Yes. He said that the area near the top has drugs and valuables, and the other side has ‘horses.’”

“We must search the area and secure them first. But did he not even give a hint as to the other location?”

“I couldn’t confirm the location precisely as he was so incoherent. However…”

Pruelle’s voice trailed off as he looked thoughtfully at the food on his plate.

“He kept repeating that the place is so secure that nobody but a person of his bloodline could open it.”

“That’s quite a significant statement. It’s not a metaphor; we’ll have to think about where it might be.”

At that moment, Yuder thought that perhaps he knew the answer. It was thanks to the words from Enon that had crossed his mind earlier.

“…Commander. I apologize for being sudden, but I have something to say about what I discovered on the third floor of the prison.”

“Hmm?”

Kishiar turned his head.

“What do you have to say?”

“In the olden times where the Duke of Tain resided, I have heard that there was a magic device that could only be opened by the power of blood lineage. Hearing Prince Pruelle’s words, it seems we may need to consider the possibility that the crest of the House of Tain we saw there could be some magic locking device.”

“A magic device that can only be opened with the power of blood lineage?”

Pruelle’s eyes widened a bit as he questioned. It seemed he was unaware that such a thing existed. Kishiar also stopped cutting his meat and fell into thought, but soon opened his mouth as if he understood what Yuder was talking about.

“…Protection of blood, huh? Hmm. Certainly, since the building was made during that era, and if the owner was a mage, there is a possibility that such a device was made to hide the fourth floor.”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness, but could you tell me what the protection of blood is? I’m ashamed to say I don’t know much about magic, so I can’t guess.”

“It’s a device that mages used about a thousand years ago as one of the methods to thoroughly protect secrets. They made it so that only the mage and those connected by his bloodline could enter where the hidden secret was.”

Kishiar, who gave an almost identical explanation, added,

“If it were the old days when magic energy filled the world abundantly, it might be known, but it has not been used for a long time now due to various problems. It’s natural not to know. There’s no need to blame yourself.”

“Is that so?”

Pruelle, nodding his head, looked back at Yuder with a newly surprised face.

“How did Sir Aile know about such a device? That’s really remarkable.”

“…If the fourth floor exists, I was curious how it could have been hidden, and I happened to learn about this method while gathering information. If Prince Pruelle hadn’t told me that the first Duke of Tain was a mage, it would have been hard to find out.”

The one who had informed him of this method was Enon, but since he couldn’t reveal Enon’s identity, he had no choice but to fumble through the explanation.

“That’s still impressive.”

Yuder felt Kishiar’s gaze on his face as well as Pruelle, who purely admired him. He avoided Kishiar’s penetrating, soundless red eyes and moved his hand toward the food plate.

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Chapter 382

Maintaining the usual impassive expression was extraordinarily difficult in front of Kishiar. It wasn't because Kishiar was perceptive. It was because it was becoming more and more awkward for Yuder to hide the truth in front of that man as the days went by.

The most unbearable enemies are always found within, not without. Yuder found the act of avoiding Kishiar's gaze more uncomfortable than anything else, and Yuder knew the reason too.

From the moment he began to harbor genuine emotions for that man, something had started to grow, irritating like a grain of sand that had entered the shoe incorrectly. At first, it was just a little annoying, but now it suffocated ceaselessly like water rising up to the neck.

It was emotion.

The attraction that was forcibly suppressed.

Regret that Yuder didn't even know the name of until recently.

The weight of all those things weighed down on Yuder, making even this small lie difficult to conceal. The past, when Yuder lived directly without disagreement between the head and the heart, felt like a distant memory.

"…Your Highness. If the 'Protection of Blood' is really in the underground dungeon, wouldn't it be better if I go and help confirm it?"

At Pruelle's voice, Kishiar's gaze that had been lingering on Yuder's face disappeared. Yuder then realized that the moment that had felt eternally long was actually just the blink of an eye.

“That would be good. But there seems to be no need to do it right away.”

As if he had never looked at Yuder’s face, Kishiar skillfully continued the conversation with Pruelle.

“Understood. Call me whenever you need me.”

“How is the list of attendees for the party coming along?”

“It is gathering faster than expected, so I will be able to compile and deliver it soon.”

As the topic shifted to the list of party attendees, Pruelle enthusiastically shared the stories he had heard from his informants. Among various rumors, what Pruelle particularly emphasized was the gossip that many southern merchants were present in Tainu.

“Upon checking, it turns out to be true. There were still quite a few who remembered a noticeable group of foreign merchants. They likely came here to help move goods and have a deep connection with my father.”

“Hmm. I’ve thought so before, but it seems that their work with Tain is really tied with enormous trust.”

“Since they have gained a lot from my father, they certainly wouldn’t want to lose that relationship.”

“True. Money and interests can be the most certain motive and connection. But… it’s still bothering me.”

“What part is bothering you?”

“Their purpose, shall I say?”

Pruelle slowly blinked at the unexpected comment, unable to guess Kishiar’s meaning.

Kishiar didn’t mind the lack of response. With a thoughtful face, he maintained silence before opening his mouth again.

“Prince Pruelle.”

“Yes.”

“Is there a possibility that those southern merchants will come here again this time?”

‘Is Kishiar thinking that the southern merchants will come to Tainu again this time?’

Sending noticeable foreign merchants to this place, where the Cavalry and the Star of Nagran shine, would not be a good choice, even if they had done well last year. Yuder would have made a different choice if he were the Tain Duke, but if blinded by greed and impatience, it was an uncertain matter.

“That… I’m not sure either, but I’ll find out as soon as I return to the capital.”

“Start investigating now, if possible. Contact those in the capital for information, and I’d like you to find out more about those southern merchants from your side.”

Pruelle’s expression turned thoughtful. Instead of wasting time asking unnecessary questions, he immediately replied that he would do so.

“I understand. I will inform you as soon as I hear anything.”

“Thank you.”

After the meal, Pruelle cautiously asked if Kishiar’s demonstration of the divine sword had gone well while he met with Graham. Although he must have seen the radiant appearance of the divine

sword hanging at Kishiar’s waist when he came in, he seemed to want to hear the story directly.

Kishiar gladly recounted what happened before Baron Willhem and the priests. Pruelle, unable to hide his regret for not having witnessed the spectacle himself, smiled.

“In fact… when I first heard through the Emperor’s announcement that Your Highness was the owner of the divine sword, I could not wholly believe it. But now it’s different. Thinking about it, leaving the capital at that time must have been part of a grand plan.”

“Really, you think so?”

“Don’t you think?”

The questioning voice was that of someone who already knew the answer. Pruelle stood up, looking in awe at Kishiar, who was smiling instead of replying. Before leaving, he left a meaningful remark.

“Now, I will not dare to try to understand the end of how far Your Highness and His Majesty the Emperor are looking.”

The door closed, and the once gentle atmosphere slowly dissipated. Yuder felt the gaze upon him once again. It was a look similar to before.

What to say?

Waiting for the other to speak in the silence was a somewhat anxious affair. Until now, he had never reacted greatly to Yuder’s suspicious side and had rather been interested in it.

As much as Yuder found it difficult to endure even a small lie, Kishiar might feel the same. If Yuder had changed, so could him.

And if the day came when Kishiar would lay down the patience they had maintained and wanted to hear about the doubts… Yuder was not very confident about how calmly he would be able to judge.

As Yuder was thinking this, finally, the awaited call rang in his ears.

“Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“You look tired; wouldn’t it be good to rest early today?”

“…Yes?”

At a question that reflexively made them lift their head, very different from what he had expected, Yuder looked straight into the face that was leaning askew, chin on the table. The unshaken eyes, transparently revealing their emotions, were looking only at Yuder’s face. It was a calm look, as if it had already foreseen even the bewilderment that Yuder was feeling now.

At that moment, the uncomfortable anxiety that had been nagging at Yuder’s nerves lost its way. Yuder momentarily lost his words and stared blankly into those eyes before finally regaining his senses.

“I am fine.”

“The assistant always says that he is fine, but to me, you never looked fine. You must be tired from moving around since early morning, so listen to me.”

“No, I am…”

He tried to say he was really fine, but it was useless. A hand that had approached in the blink of an eye touched his forehead, and the words stopped as soon as their lips started to move.

“See, you have a fever. I thought you ate a little less than usual, too.”

“…”

It was… entirely because of Kishiar’s gaze. Yuder slowly closed and opened his eyes, aware of the cool warmth of the large hand that covered about half of his field of vision.

A temperature that was cool yet uniquely warm.

The body fragrance emanating from within.

Due to the contact of skin against skin, the dark fog that had been crouching in his chest was suddenly unleashed, and words that should have only been in his chest suddenly sprang from his lips.

“… Aren’t you going to ask anything?”

The moment he spoke, a brief regret passed by. It was as if he had confessed to being stung.

“What do you mean?”

“…”

“Is it because I didn’t ask you what you were talking about with Mick earlier?”

Of course, it wasn’t a question asked out of genuine ignorance. Kishiar knew what Yuder was talking about, but he had decided not to ask anything.

It was as it had been when he said that the key to changing their relationship was in Yuder’s hands.

Until Yuder opened his mouth first, Kishiar would never snatch that key or pretend to see it. If Yuder did not approach first, he would

never intrude first - a fact that still applied in this situation, clearly realized through those words.

Suddenly, a day when Yuder had his first meal in front of Kishiar came to mind. Yuder had been cautious then, not even touching most of the prepared food, but he had lied emotionlessly when asked if it was delicious.

And then Kishiar had repeatedly asked the same question until Yuder gave an honest answer. The man, who wanted someone who could honestly tell what he felt rather than saying something tasted good when it did not, was still repeating the same thing with the same persistence, albeit in a slightly different way.

He would willingly endure until the wall crumbled and revealed its interior, as he had done so several times already, breaking down Yuder.

Yuder inhaled and exhaled deeply without opening his mouth. Ridiculous as it may seem, at the same time as confirming his opponent’s unchanging solidity, his anxiety disappeared, and his mind cleared.

He relaxed his tightly tensed shoulders and opened his mouth with a sigh-like expression.

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“Mick and I… we only briefly discussed abilities. Come to think of it, why didn’t you tell me beforehand that he was an Awakener?”

“He doesn’t like to openly admit that he’s an Awakener. But it seems he couldn’t deceive the assistant’s eyes, could he?”

“I couldn’t possibly not notice, as he kept observing me with that ability.”

“Really? What did he say?”

Yuder hesitated for a moment.

“He said… there are many holes in my core.”

“Holes?”

Kishiar faltered for a moment. He seemed to be trying to understand what he had heard, furrowing his brows, but as his eyes met Yuder’s, they slowly unfolded again. His expression was as bright and beautiful as ever, with a smile that was no different from before. But beneath it was a layer of caution that was incomparable to the past. He asked, slowly but gently enough that Yuder wouldn’t feel threatened.

“I can’t quite… guess what he means. Did Mick tell you what it means?”

“It didn’t seem like a metaphor. He said it doesn’t look dangerous, so there’s no need to worry, perhaps…”

Yuder hesitated because the memory of the numerous gaps and the pain of realizing them had come to mind.

That pain was most akin to coldness. Although he knew it wasn't actually cold, when he thought about the holes somewhere in his chest, it felt as though all warmth was disappearing around him.

It's very strange not to know what was once there but is now gone. He only forgot about it because he tried not to think too deeply about it.

Yuder could not fully guess what would have been in those holes inside him. Whether it was a memory, emotion, why it had disappeared, or what would happen if he could fill it all.

But he thought it was okay. There were many more important things in the world.

Yet, despite his assurance that it was alright, Kishiar's observant gaze did not change a bit. He kept his silence for a long time, studying Yuder's expressionless white face with a cautious and persistent eye.

The familiar yet unfamiliar sense that overcame Yuder when he realized that he was being observed, even though he was hiding something, made him feel strange.

'Ah.'

The absolute barrier that had protected his defenseless self, not being able to see after capturing the giant Pethuamet. And the gaze that he could feel but not see when he was within it. That sensation, which he hadn't felt since he started seeing again, was now returning.

When holding the invisible him in his arms and feeding him, applying medicine and rebandaging, when secretly climbing a tree as if no one was in the world. Had Kishiar been watching him like this all those times?

With eyes that were so blindly trusting and yet so tender it hurt.

His heart throbbed violently. It was a sensation akin to pain, but it wasn't cold.

"Why are you looking at me… like that?"

"No. It's nothing. I was just thinking that I need to ask Mick a little more about it."

When Yuder asked with a slightly suppressed voice, the emotion Kishiar had shown was quickly hidden as if it had never been there. Yuder stared at the familiar eyes that expertly rearranged emotions, then impulsively opened his mouth again.

"Commander. But if I were to say that I wasn't surprised, since I already knew about it… would you believe me?"

It was a rather incoherent statement, even in his own mind. Even though Kishiar was generous towards him, he thought Kishiar might take it as a joke. But Kishiar didn't laugh. He simply glanced at Yuder and asked curtly.

"Is that so? How?"

"Just… It's my body, so I naturally came to know."

"Has it been that way from the beginning?"

He was silent at those words, then shook his head.

"And yet you say it's not dangerous?"

"It's not a life-threatening injury… I don't feel like I'm in a critically dangerous state, just like Mick said."

Kishiar was silent for a long time. After quite a while, he quietly opened his mouth.

“Have you heard exactly what Mick Shuden’s ability is?”

“He only said it’s an ability to see the essence inside the shell.”

“He sees the essence embedded in the subject’s flesh. It’s usually something one might call a soul. He was the one who confirmed for me that my vessel has healed since the day of awakening.”

Although anything alive could be said to have a soul, Mick could see the essence even in non-living things. Kishiar muttered that it might be seen as a suitable ability for a merchant, picking out good items for trade, but there was no amusement on his face.

“Even if your soul wasn’t originally in such a state, now that it has so many holes, it doesn’t seem good even if it doesn’t threaten your life. But I must be thankful that I heard it directly from you now, thanks to meeting Mick Shuden.”

“…”

“I’ll look into the matter myself. Will that be okay?”

Yuder didn’t know exactly what Kishiar meant by looking into the holes in his soul, but he slowly nodded his head. A faint smile finally appeared at the corners of Kishiar’s mouth.

“If there’s anything else you want to say, I’m ready to listen at any time, so speak comfortably without doubting the listener’s trust. About that hole, or anything else, it’s all fine.”

“…Yes.”

To talk about the holes within him, he would inevitably have to mention the lost memories and emotions. That was still Yuder’s deepest secret that he couldn’t utter.

But the moment Kishiar’s whisper reached his ear, Yuder unknowingly felt an urge to say something. Not even knowing what he wanted to say, his throat, lips, and tongue were incredibly dry and tingling. That urge, barely suppressed, reminded him of the time when he was blind and longed for and wanted to reach out to Kishiar.

He unwittingly parted his lips slightly and then closed them again. Instead of revealing his secret, he thought he would like to touch the smooth and pale cheek and eyelashes in front of him, just like when he had taken advantage of his blindness to touch the man.

It was truly ridiculous, but his mind was filled with that thought, and he couldn’t think of anything else for a moment.

And in that moment, as if reading Yuder’s will, Kishiar twitched one eyebrow.

“When you stare so ardently… I somehow want to interpret your intention as I please.”

Yuder was silent. Simultaneously, Kishiar’s eyes changed as well. The air took on a different color in an instant.

“I feel like rewarding my assistant for speaking honestly, so I’m thinking of coming over to you now. If you don’t like it, stand up and go call the servants to clear the table.”

That sentence reminded Yuder of a conversation once held in front of the Commander’s office door.

Yuder cautiously looked down at the approaching white hand, filled with a force that could not be denied.

Naturally, Yuder did not stand up this time either.

The approaching man grabbed both sides of the back of Yuder's seated chair and lowered himself. As the man's smooth face approached, as if to look into each other's eyes, Yuder's awe and repressed longing flared up surprisingly strongly.

Unable to bear the blatant expression reflected in Kishiar's eyes, Yuder closed his eyes, and a deep kiss began, as if it had been waiting. Through the mingling lips, more explicit and sensual than before, Yuder felt a satisfaction greater than what had been desired. When coming to senses, Yuder's arms had somehow ended up around Kishiar's neck. As Yuder tried to lower them, a white hand reached out, holding the clasped arms, preventing them from being released, and delving a little deeper.

It was still as sensually tingling as the back of the head and as addictive as one could not escape. However, the shock that was there at first was gone now. In its place was a sense of union that felt momentarily familiar and had become more concentrated and profound beneath a seemingly calmed surface.

Drinking in the breath that flowed between the lips, Yuder felt the heat that resonated dully within.

'… Maybe Enon was right.'

The desire that incessantly nudged might be considered abnormal, but it might not be.

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How did others endure such intense hunger and unfulfilled desires? The notion of living with this constant longing to bind with someone deeper and longer was so provocative. An overwhelming number of emotions for one person filled the mind so much that no other thoughts could form, and yet the desire to escape from them seemed strange.

He wondered if Kishiar La Orr was thinking the same thing.

During such disorganized thoughts, a faint sound of knocking from somewhere reached his ears. Suddenly coming to his senses and opening his eyes, the man who had been embracing Yuder as if to imprison Yuder between the chairs gently bit his lower lip as if to say don't worry.

A moist mucous membrane slid smoothly over the reflexively parted lips and delved back in. A low sound was made as the tips of long fingers gently supported the tilted neck. The insignificant sensation of feeling the soft flesh inside the hair merged with something hot deep inside the mouth, and in an instant, a surprisingly sharp pleasure brushed the brain.

The core of desire ignited again, threatening to blur his mind, but the knocking from outside the door brought consciousness back. This time there was a voice as well.

"Commander, may I enter…?"

He thought they were servants coming to clear the table, but it wasn't. Yuder quickly turned his head as soon as he recognized Ever's voice. Just that alone felt like it required tremendous patience.

"…Commander."

Not liking the muffled sound of his voice as if he had just woken up, he cleared his throat. Kishiar chuckled and kissed Yuder's furrowed brow.

"Hmm?"

Even though he knew why Yuder had called, the tickling sensation of a nose rubbing against the ear and neck caused the shoulders to involuntarily shrink. Yuder, lightly kissing his neck, briefly battled fiercely between the desire to pull the unmoving man closer and the reason to push him away.

But reason won in the end. Barely releasing his hand from around Kishiar's neck, he gestured towards the closed door.

"…We must open the door."

"We must."

But contrary to his words, Kishiar remained still even after responding. It was an unusual reaction.

Perhaps Kishiar felt the same regret as he did, and the sensation of his heart tightening and loosening came again. Exhaling hot breath from deep within his throat, Yuder unknowingly reached out and caressed Kishiar's cheek. Unable to fully feel through the glove, but when Kishiar looked up with a profound, smile-less gaze, an indescribable emotion welled up.

Without exchanging words, it was understood.

He felt the same as Yuder.

Yuder changed his mind from pulling away after just one caress and carefully swept Kishiar's eye. The very small, meaningless sound of golden hair brushing against the glove felt strangely loud.

Kishiar also reached out and caressed Yuder's cheek. Like looking in a mirror, the stroking of the same spot ignited an inexplicable emotion. Perhaps it was a tenderness worth naming.

Only then did Kishiar finally straighten and stand up. The emotion just shown could not be felt in the voice commanding to enter.

"Ah, you were still eating. My apologies."

"It's fine. I was about to call the servants to clear the table. But what happened?"

Ever, who had entered the room, seemed surprised at the sight of a table still laden with untouched dishes but quickly composed herself and reported on the purpose of her visit.

"The members at the security management team, led by Finn, searched all over the third floor of the dungeon where Yuder found it. They say the sound of the wind coming from there is most likely the voice of a person… and possibly even that of an Awakener."

At the mention of a human voice, Yuder recalled the strange wind sound he had heard in that place. When he thought back to when he heard it closest to the wall where the Tain's crest was, it was indeed more like a sharp sound that leaks through a window crack when it snows rather than a normal wind sound.

But it could also be the voice of an Awakener.

"Are you certain?"

Ever nodded at Yuder's question.

"Probably. The sound isn't constant; it's heard for a while and then quiet for about half a day. This pattern has been repeated, the guards testified. Based on that, Jody has listened several times, and

he’s sure it’s a person, and he feels that the sensation is similar to that of an Awakener like himself.”

Jody Sliem was a Cavalry member who could scream and launch various patterns of attack. He was much more sensitive to sound than others, and if such a person assured that the voice was like that of someone with similar abilities, there seemed to be no need for doubt.

Yuder turned his gaze to Kishiar.

“It seems most likely that they have hidden people in there after all.”

“It seems so.”

Ever, noticing the serious expression on Kishiar’s face, seemed to catch on to the general content of the ongoing conversation and lowered her voice.

“Did Prince Pruelle find out the information as planned?”

“Yes. It seems they’ve hidden lifeless objects in the Red Deer Consortium and people in the security management team’s dungeon.”

“My God…”

Horror and anger darkened Ever’s face.

“Ever, did Baron Willhem show any signs of visiting the security management team?”

“No. Not while we were watching. But according to the knights and soldiers, Baron Willhem secretly met with Knight Commander Jeymer Phil a few times a month.”

“A few times a month… That’s an absurdly insincere interval to feed and manage people regularly.”

Kishiar’s fingers tapped his crossed arms. Ever waited silently until he had finished thinking and issued his orders.

“Continue to monitor the third floor discreetly without attracting attention. Baron Willhem will surely visit there again in the next few days.”

“Understood.”

After bowing her head in response, Ever briefly mentioned a few more ongoing tasks at the Cavalry Investigation Headquarters set up in the Security Management Team and concluded her report. She seemed about to leave but then fumbled in her pocket, as she had one more errand.

“Yuder. I took care of the letters that came for you this morning. Here it is.”

This had happened before when letters had come for Yuder, and Ever had taken care of it then as well. Yuder thanked her and took the few letters she handed over. Seeing familiar names after a long time, his expression relaxed slightly.

“By the way… did you chew on Reaper grass during the meal?”

“What?”

“Your lip seems swollen. Here.”

Ever tapped her lip to show where it might be swollen. Yuder awkwardly felt his own lip, but without a mirror and only feeling it, he could not tell if it was indeed swollen.

But if it was really swollen, the reason was obvious. It was likely due to what they had just been doing.

“…”

Yuder furrowed his brows with an indescribable feeling, then slowly nodded.

“It seems so. That must be… what it looks like.”

“Be careful. The pepper herbs in the West are much spicier than in other regions. Even Emun accidentally chewed on some in yesterday’s lunch dish, and his tongue and lips were swollen all the way until today.”

After leaving kind advice that sucking on ice would help, Ever patted Yuder’s shoulder and bid him farewell.

“I will take my leave now, Commander.”

Once she left, silence filled the room again. Yuder looked back at Kishiar with a peculiar feeling. He was slightly furrowing his brows, smiling apologetically.

“…Is it really swollen?”

“A little.”

Despite having engaged in the same activity, Kishiar looked perfectly fine. Well, the one who had been bitten on the lip during their kiss was Yuder, not him. The first time they had kissed, Kishiar had suffered a minor injury to his lips, but except for that, there had never been a mark. Perhaps that was just his nature.

“It’s fortunate that there was already someone who had mistakenly eaten the pepper herb.”

“I thought you would be upset that I had bitten your lip, is that how you’re going to let it go?”

“I won’t get angry over something like that.”

“My assistant is indeed magnanimous.”

“It’s something I wanted to do, and it didn’t hurt.”

Kishiar reacted rather differently to those words, for some reason.

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The man, who had been blinking in silence several times, turned his head away, covering his mouth with his hand. Yuder couldn't help but doubt whether he had said something wrong.

"…Commander?"

"No… Just wait for a moment."

After blocking the approaching Yuder, Kishiar lowered his hand after a while, and turned back to Yuder. The first thing that caught his eye was the fiery look in his eyes.

"I never used to believe that honesty could be the greatest weapon… But you never know until you experience it."

"Pardon?"

"I mean, your words just now pleased me more than any praise I've ever received."

Had not complaining or getting angry because it didn't hurt really deserved to be taken as such great praise? He didn't understand why Kishiar reacted that way to his answer, but he decided not to ask any further since he seemed pleased.

"Yuder."

"…Yes."

What was he calling for this time? Kishiar's red lips curled into a smile at Yuder's slightly delayed response.

"Heal quickly."

“…Pardon?”

“I always wish for your recovery, but never have I wished for it as deeply as I do at this moment.”

“I would like that too, if possible…”

But it was not something that could be done at will. Healing his body was now in the hands of Enon, Hellem, and Mick, so there was nothing he could do himself.

Even to find a way to complement Kishiar’s skill, he wished that they would find a clue within a short time…

‘…No, wait.’

While thinking absentmindedly, Yuder glanced at Kishiar’s still-smiling face. Only then did it occur to him that the meaning of that smile might not simply be a wish for a speedy recovery.

And as if he had been waiting for that realization, a low and sweet voice rang in his ears.

“How much I long for the day when you look at me again with those eyes, and the time when we return together to our Cavalry… My assistant probably wouldn’t understand.”

Our Cavalry.

In the strange emotion that unfamiliar yet familiar words evoked, Yuder found himself unable to say anything.

…

After the Duke of Peletta and his Cavalry, achieved a significant victory at the western edge of the Great Sarain Forest, the monsters’ attacks that had been disturbing the borderlands were reduced to the usual levels.

Not only did the Cavalry defeat a giant monster without losing a single man, but they also left their excellent elite members in the Great Sarain Forest to assist with monster subjugation, receiving the praises of the Empire's people living in the borderlands.

Additionally, when the rumor that the Duke of Peletta was confirmed by the Sun God Temple priests in the west to be the true owner of the divine sword began to spread, a new tension began to stir in the capital.

Naturally, it was the high-ranking nobles who had most doubted this rumor that caused the tension.

"…That's absurd. The priests recognized the divine sword?"

The sharp voice that carried far made Kiolle da Diarca halt his steps. His gaze fell on a small rose garden where the Duke of Diarca often enjoyed a leisurely cup of tea with his close friends. Today, too, the Duke was hosting a meeting in that place, famous as the most beautiful section of the extensive garden divided into several sections.

"The Tain Duke's house is keeping it quiet… but there are many who saw him win battles with that sword… It seems it couldn't be denied…."

"The reason I'm doing this now is, of course, to use the health of the Crown Prince as an excuse…"

"Are you going to burden yourself with the legend of the first Emperor…? But please, don't worry too much…"

In contrast to the clanging voice of the Duke Diarca, the voices of those around were faint and weak, barely audible. But what was being said was not difficult to deduce.

The new master of the Cavalry and the Divine Sword. Kiolle scrunched his nose and recalled the central theme of their conversation.

The news that Duke Peletta had become the new master of the Divine Sword had been dismissed as mere rumor since Emperor Keilusa's announcement. But as the achievements of the Cavalry in the West became the talk of the town, the doubters were gradually increasing.

Of course, the Imperial Knights mostly scoffed at the rumor, but Kiolle chose silence over agreement with them, as usual. He had personally seen the power wielded by the Cavalry and the inexplicable and unsettling intimidation demonstrated by the 'Dissolute Duke.'

When Kiolle first heard the announcement that Kishiar was the new master of the Divine Sword, he thought it might not be a political ploy but the truth. His father and others didn't believe it, though.

But judging by the words he had just heard, Duke Peletta seemed to have presented undeniable evidence this time.

If Duke Peletta were playing at being a leader with commoners, the nobles wouldn't care. But if the new master of the Divine Sword could lead those with strength enough to quell more than monsters and achieve great feats, it would be something they could not ignore. Especially in times like these.

The Crown Prince, who was bearing the future of the Diarca family, had been in seclusion for a long time since the assassination attempt by the Apeto family. Rumors spread that he had gone mad. Duke Diarca had tried to cure the Crown Prince while suppressing the rumors, but it was not easy to quell them, even with the Diarca family name.

What would happen if Duke Peletta, the rightful master of the Divine Sword, and the Cavalry returned in such a situation?

Even Kiolle, who had no interest in politics or power struggles, could see how much on edge his father had been lately. It would probably lead to a war without war.

Kiolle thought of Yuder Aile, the only Cavalry member he knew by name. He hadn't seen that arrogant and monstrous guy's face for quite some time. Through the mark of the oath on his wrist, he knew that Yuder was alive and well, but every time he heard news of the Cavalry from the West, Yuder's image came to mind.

'If the rumor about a Cavalry member defeating a monster alone in the Great Sarain Forest is true, it must have been him.'

It was more a conviction than a speculation, something he felt through personal experience.

Kiolle, shivering, decided to stop thinking and head home. He would have, if someone from the group with his father hadn't spotted him and called out loudly.

"Oh! Young Sir Kiolle has returned."

The men, who had been sipping tea in the garden and elegantly cursing Duke Peletta, all looked at Kiolle warmly, lavishing praise upon him. Kiolle recognized his first and third brothers among them and frowned deeply. The brothers also looked at Kiolle, their irritation barely hidden beneath expressionless faces. Only their father, Duke Diarca, welcomed his youngest son with a softer expression and a gesture.

"Kiolle. Have you arrived? Come this way."

"…Yes."

Kiolle headed towards his father, swallowing a deep regret that he should have gone in earlier. As he approached, the courtiers around the duke became excited and began to praise him.

“Young Kiolle truly resembles the duke in his youth.”

“It’s as if I’m seeing His Highness’s appearance from 40 years ago.”

Duke Diarca was not particularly pleased that Kiolle had become a knight, but whenever he saw him in the knight’s uniform, he gladly accepted such praise.

“Are you just returning now? You’re later than I expected.”

“Yes, I was a bit delayed as I was discussing the training plan with the Commander.”

“The Commander of the Imperial Knights is Theorado Van Tain, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“The one with the most peculiar talent among those from the Tain family, the one who is so obsessed with the sword that he doesn’t even go home. I hear his family is quite concerned.”

“I also don’t often go home due to training.”

“Ah, but, of course, Sir Kiolle is different from him.”

After responding insincerely to someone who was desperately trying to join the conversation with his father, Kiolle only looked at his father and closed his mouth.

‘I wish he would tell me to leave quickly.’

It was more than annoying that he couldn’t respond as he wanted due to the vow, but the Duke of Diarca, who by now Kiolle thought would tell him to go, was looking at him with a face lost in thought. Kiolle realized that his aging father’s eyes were fixed on the emblem of the Imperial Knights on his chest and felt puzzled.

‘Why is he doing that?’

“Kiolle. It seems that you have a close relationship with Theorado Van Tain.”

It was more a dull relationship between a Commander and a subordinate knight than a close one, but Kiolle said nothing at first. Duke Diarca, looking at his son as if he had found a good way out from an unexpected place, asked,

“Have you heard anything about the situation in the Tain family lately?”

“Not particularly… no.”

“The Duke of Tain says he trusts Theorado most among his nephews, so ask him about it the next time you talk.”

“…Yes.”

The answer that they were not close enough to have such a conversation was unnecessary to his father. Duke Diarca smiled and lightly patted his son’s arm.

“I was angry when you used to make a fuss about becoming a mere knight, but lately, I think it was good that I listened to your stubbornness. Keep going as you are now.”

The nobles, who had secretly known about the youngest son’s many mishaps, exchanged meaningful glances. Kiolle saw a dark

energy in the eyes of his brothers mixed in among them and furrowed his already furrowed brow even more.

‘…This is really annoying.’

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Chapter 386

It was an incredibly tiresome affair for a Diarca to be born as the youngest son, bearing the strongest resemblance to the father within the family. Even Kiolle, who was born with an aristocratic character and took pride in his status and roots more than anyone, could not like his own siblings. Since he had decided to become an Imperial Knight at an early age, he had not been openly on guard, but the problem began when the atmosphere gradually changed subtly after being tied to a dog-like oath.

He keenly felt the change in the attitudes of those who confronted him if he inadvertently kept his mouth shut. Some people found Kiolle more challenging the quieter he became, and others could not hide their contempt for him.

As for his brothers and sisters, the more Kiolle kept his mouth shut, the more they openly showed their blatant vigilance. Even those who had once dealt with him without fault had recently begun to reveal their suspicions and guards toward Kiolle.

His father, Duke Diarca, was now patting him on the back and praising him for growing up, but his gaze was so intense that it almost felt like a knife cutting his neck.

‘Look at that gaze. He looks like he’s trying to kill me.’

His eldest brother, who was the heir, ignored Kiolle openly because of his dignity, but the third one, who did not receive attention from his father, was different. His eyes blazed with anger.

Kiolle pretended not to see his brothers’ stares and waited for a moment to speak to Duke Diarca. Right now, someone was skillfully intervening in the conversation.

“Your Grace, I heard you’re looking for the people who cured Baron Durmand’s migraines. Are you planning to send them to the Bright Palace?”

Baron Durmand, one of Duke Diarca’s closest associates, was famous for having tried every possible treatment for his chronic migraines. Kiolle recalled hearing that he had met a commoner healer and miraculously got better.

Could it be that Crown Prince Katchian’s illness was so serious that his father would resort to such superstitions? As he was anxiously thinking, Duke Diarca stroked his white beard and smiled.

“Well, I don’t really believe it, but since Baron Durmand recommends it so highly, I think it might be worth trying once. It would make the aftermath much more comfortable.”

“Then would you like to meet a commoner healer I know? The one I know is quite skillful…”

Not wanting to miss the opportunity, those around began eagerly offering to introduce commoner healers they knew. Kiolle seized the moment and quickly told Duke Diarca that he would retire. The Duke looked at his youngest son’s face, full of irritation, and clicked his tongue.

“You’ve matured a bit, but you still have a long way to go. The conversations at such gatherings can be valuable truths.”

Since he had been forced to keep his mouth shut rather than mature, Kiolle brazenly remained silent. The Duke waved his hand, signaling that it was alright to leave.

“Yes, go rest. Ah, and…”

As if he’d remembered something, the Duke added,

“I’m planning to change all the Knights guarding the Crown Prince soon, so there will be a notice to the Imperial Knights. Don’t act rashly, just wait.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Isn’t it time for you to take on a proper task? The Crown Prince will likely feel more comfortable with you than strangers.”

That statement meant he intended to place Kiolle in the closest position to the Crown Prince. Even though there were all sorts of ominous rumors, the Crown Prince was still the Crown Prince. Having the opportunity to get a seal of approval right next to him was an extraordinary privilege more than anything else. Kiolle felt his brothers’ wary glances fixed on his face once again. Although he felt an unpleasant irritation bubbling up inside him, he obediently bowed his head and withdrew.

In this way, Kiolle da Diarca’s presence grew day by day, and he himself was unaware of it.

—-

To my dear Yuder.

Yuder read the opening of the thickest letter from Gakane among those that had come to him. At first, there were concerns about Yuder’s health, and the middle part contained minor incidents that occurred while interacting with the mages of the Western Mage Union, but the latter part was a little different.

…And I was hesitant to write this, but there was an incident a few days ago. Among the newly emerged monsters, there was one that absorbed magic power. It was just one creature, but since the Great Sarain Forest has been so filled with magic since the opening of the Magic Spring Ruins, it was not easy to kill, as its recovery was too quick no matter how much it was attacked.

The new monster was not only large but also exhibited a remarkable ability to recover in areas filled with magic. The Cavalry members had a hard time figuring this out, and there were moments when lives were in danger.

Normally, I would have lured the monster to the very end by myself and used the opportunity to evacuate my comrades first. But for some reason, I kept thinking about our last conversation. Remember? Even if we don't succeed…

Even if we don't succeed, the best outcome may be that everyone is safe.

Yuder recited these words he had said at the time and continued reading the next sentence.

…So, risking the surrounding terrain collapsing, we just retreated. It was only after retreating and regrouping with others that we could truly grasp the power of that monster. Having already caught a magic-absorbing monster before, I think we found the solution rather quickly.

After writing about how the experience of catching a small Pethuamet helped, Gakane calmly explained how they had caught the monster.

It was a creature easily caught by luring it to an area with less magic, but it felt so futile when we caught it. If I had been stubborn at that moment, I would have died in vain, right?

Though he had suffered a long tear in his chest, Gakane's life was not in danger. He expressed gratitude for Yuder's advice that came to mind at that moment and added that he shouldn't worry about his health.

My injury is almost healed thanks to the mages' help. By the time you get this letter, the bandage will probably be off. If you knew how

much I've grown in ability from this experience, you would probably be surprised. Hinn teased me several times, saying that I clearly risked danger to grow!

Yuder read that part several times with a strange feeling, then exhaled softly.

'…Has the part I was worried about been resolved?'

In his previous life, Gakane died while standing up for his comrades during a monster subjugation. He heard that the body was found torn in the chest, in a horrifying condition. Yes, that's what had happened.

As soon as he read the sentence about the injury, a vague old memory that he had long forgotten faintly resurfaced. Although the specific circumstances might have been slightly different, it was almost identical to this recent incident.

Yuder knew how painful it had been for the Cavalry members who had gone with Gakane to learn that they had survived thanks to his sacrifice. Memories surged, one after the other: the hatred that had stemmed from that place, leading to a fight with the members almost every day; the rage that had felt like a wall, which he had vented as much as possible on Kishiar.

All of it had become as if it never happened.

In the letter, it was lightly written that the mission was successfully completed and not to forget the offer of a commissioning right. However, the weight contained within those words was by no means light.

Gakane, in this life, had safely overcome the crisis just as Yuder had wished.

Yuder had believed it would be so. He believed, and thus he could leave Gakane there and depart. But despite that, the weight he felt when he faced the fact that it had actually happened was somewhat different. Complicated emotions that were hard to describe surged at once, and Yuder was unable for some time to turn to the next page of the letter.

A little later, as Yuder opened the last page of the letter, he narrowed his eyes once again, this time with a slightly different meaning.

… But you know, after this matter ended, there was also an unusual discovery at the Magic Spring Ruins.

The Western Mage Union decided to dig under the ground, thinking that half of the concentrated magic flowing from the Magic Spring Ruins had now seeped out. The Cavalry members agreed to help them dig underneath the rock, and surprisingly, magic ore stones that no one had expected were discovered.

At first, when we dug up just a few, it was fine, but later, when they kept coming out without end, everyone became speechless. I don't know much about magic ores, but having so many large fist-sized ones buried in one place is a rare thing even in the mines?… Thanks to that, the mages are in an uproar.

If Gakane was right, it was tantamount to discovering a new vein of magic ore. That quality magic ore buried in bulk in none other than the Great Sarain Forest, a region stretching across the borders of several countries. A tremendous future with greedy hordes clamoring for it seemed to unfold naturally.

In the previous life, when the whole western region was devastated due to monster occurrences, and human footprints were cut off, leaving only the troublesome Great Sarain Forest, this naturally hadn't happened.

But according to Kanna, it seems that this is not a natural phenomenon. She thinks there might be some old information related to that place that can be read? So she wants to dig more to read the information. I reported to the Commander, but I'm a bit nervous about what he'll reply.

Gakane concluded the new news at that point and wrote that Kanna would soon leave for Tainu as soon as things were settled. Yuder folded the letter after reading that far. The next letters from Kanna and Jimmy contained similar yet different stories from Gakane's perspective.

The numerous magic ore stones that had come from beneath the Magic Spring. And Kanna's significant statement.

What information could she read from beneath that? What could it possibly be?

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Chapter 387

“Was there some alarming news in the letters?”

The soft question came as soon as the letters were read and set aside. Yuder looked up and met the gaze of Kishiar, who was sitting not far away, watching him.

“Why do you think that?”

“Your expression is different than usual.”

There could be only one reason for a change in expression while reading. Yuder looked down at the letters in his hand and opened his mouth.

“…I was a bit surprised to hear that Gakane was injured.”

“Ah. I’ve heard that news. It’s fortunate that he wasn’t seriously hurt.”

Kishiar nodded slowly, as if understanding. If a close comrade was in danger, anyone would react differently than usual. That wasn’t the real reason, but Yuder responded quietly.

“Yes. It truly is… fortunate.”

A fortunate event.

In his previous life, what had left an indelible scar on the entire Cavalry was now simply summed up in that one word.

Gakane Bolunwald’s untimely death had been the first thing Yuder wanted to change when he returned to the past. But they

couldn’t be together at the very moment when Gakane was in danger again.

The fact that Yuder could not be with him due to external factors when Gakane was in crisis was the same as in his previous life. However, the outcome was different. It was proof that his own efforts to change the future had clearly had an effect.

Things beyond his reach could be changed.

This gave him renewed confidence that he could also change the death of Kishiar La Orr and everything surrounding it.

‘And the future beyond that.’

Yuder looked straight into Kishiar’s face, more squarely than ever before. Kishiar briefly tilted his head, wondering at the meaning of that gaze, and then quickly closed his eyes, flashing an attractive smile.

“By the way, did Gakane Bolunwald tell you about the ore vein discovered beneath the Magic Spring Ruins? It’s quite interesting.”

“Yes.”

After answering, Yuder fell silent for a moment and continued.

“Could the vein be the reason why magic started to accumulate there?”

“Well… If I must say, I think it’s the other way around.”

Kishiar answered briefly and explained.

“Do you know how magic stones form?”

“I know they are produced in places where magic is thin.”

“Right. Then have you thought about why places with many magic stones have thin magic?”

Yuder was familiar with the everyday use of magic stones but had never considered that aspect. As he shook his head, Kishiar nodded, as if he had expected that response.

“It’s a simple issue if you understand how magic stones are formed. They require magic to be concentrated for a long time and hardened like a rock. So, a place where magic stones are abundant was originally a land with enough magic to be concentrated.”

“…So the thin magic in places with many magic stones is the result of the original magic being transformed into stones and being consumed?”

“You catch on quickly.”

Kishiar praised him, smiling as he continued his explanation.

“Magic stones are now very common, but they were rare minerals in the past. In the era when the first Emperor was just establishing the Orr Empire, the term ‘magic stone’ did not even exist. Mages used this as the basis to point to magic stones as the main cause of the phenomenon of thin magic.”

Unlike the old times filled with abundant magic power, as time went by, the magic gradually began to thin. Correspondingly, the number of Mages also decreased, and it became harder to find those who could wield outstanding magic.

Kishiar explained that, in contrast to this, the discovery of magic ore veins had gradually increased. Unlike the magic power that naturally existed and circulated in the air, once the power stored within a magic ore was exhausted, it was gone forever. However, no one could find a way to eliminate the emerging magic ore, so even those who, like the Western Mage Union, were trying to solve this

phenomenon, couldn’t find any particularly good solutions. The Mages had started to focus more on creating magic tools rather than researching magic, and this was ultimately the reason why.

After learning the previously unknown relationship between magic power and magic ore, Yuder carefully sorted out his thoughts.

‘If what he says is true, it would be more correct that the magic ores were created because a large amount of pure magic started to accumulate, rather than because of the magic ores found under the magic spring.’

Kishiar was right; the cause and effect were reversed.

Yuder recalled the words Enon had spoken while looking at the Magic Spring Ruins.

The bitter assertion that natural magic wouldn’t accumulate so abnormally, so it must have been artificially created.

Kishiar had also previously revealed that the range of the Great Sarain Forest and the range of the magic pooled underground matched so well that it could not be considered a coincidence.

If these words were true, could someone who had trapped the magic under the Great Sarain Forest have predicted that so much magic ore would be created?

‘The history of the abnormal expansion of the Great Sarain Forest reaches back a thousand years. Back then, the term “magic ore” did not even exist, so the chances that they didn’t know are higher.’

Who could have performed such a massive task, and if so, what was the purpose, what was the method? Now he couldn’t guess at all.

‘In the end, all I can trust is Kanna.’

“Commander, what will happen to the ownership of the discovered ore vein?”

“Basically, it belongs to the country of the discoverer, but that’s mainly possible because the discoverers usually belong to the country where the vein is located. This time, the vein could cover the entire Great Sarain Forest, so it might be quite tricky. Well, that’s something for His Majesty to worry about. All we have to do is try to finish our investigations before the news of the discovery spreads.”

Yuder agreed, putting down the letters in his hand and turning his head towards the window. The distant view of Tainu seemed slightly different from usual. Until a few days ago, it had been hard to find a place with lights on at night. People, panicked by the explosion and city lockdown, had hidden inside and extinguished their lights early. But now, the number of buildings with lights on was almost as many as when he first arrived.

The clear evidence that the enhanced security by the Cavalry, the Peletta Knights, and the Western Mage Union had helped regain stability.

In some ways, that scenery was also a result he hadn’t achieved in the past. Yuder’s memories of the West were of a place moaning from the aftermath of terrible destruction.

“It seems like it’s about time to head out.”

Following Yuder’s gaze, Kishiar stood up from his seat.

Tonight, Kishiar was planning to go out during the night, unlike usual. The ostensible reason was to make a round and encourage those diligently managing Tainu’s security, but his real purpose was different.

A few hours ago, they had secretly received news through Ever's messenger service that Baron Willhem, who had mysteriously slipped out of the mansion and made a sudden appearance at the security management team, was now in the area.

Soon enough, as expected, Baron Willhem had begun to make his move, with an impending auction and party on the horizon.

'Since security was stable and there was no sign of the Star of Nagran moving again, I thought he would begin to act.'

Within the Security Management Team, the Cavalry members, led by Ever, were secretly observing what Baron Willhem was doing. During this time, Kishiar decided to visit the Red Deer Consortium while the guard was down.

They concealed themselves in the darkness, donning black cloaks that hid their figures and wearing their hats upside down as they silently slipped out. Seated on the driver's seat of the carriage parked behind the building was only Nathan Zuckerman, dressed not in his usual knightly attire but the clothes of a common driver. He silently bowed his head in greeting to Kishiar and then took hold of the reins. As soon as Kishiar and Yuder were inside, the carriage departed at once.

"Only three people, but if we compare by strength, it's rather excessive."

Though their numbers were only three, by ability alone, there were two Sword Masters, one High Priest, one Mage, and two Awakeners. It was an extraordinary combination that could not be seen elsewhere.

The carriage swiftly traveled the road, arriving at its destination in no time.

The Red Deer Consortium building, cordoned off with lines to prevent ordinary people from entering, looked ghastly even from a distance. As Yuder disembarked from the carriage, he realized that Kishiar had already magically disguised his face.

“You have arrived,” he stated.

Two members of the Peletta Knights, guarding the Red Deer Consortium building, approached and greeted them in a whisper, “The Tainu Knights guarding this place will return in two hours. We will signal you from outside when the time is near.”

Under normal circumstances, the Tainu Knights would have guarded this crucial place diligently, but because they were now jointly managing security, an opportunity had been created. Yuder followed Kishiar into the building. Many things had changed since their previous visit, but the most prominent alteration was the large hole conspicuously present on the first floor of the building. It was the trace of an explosion when the Star of Nagran had invaded.

After entering, Nathan Zuckerman was the first to move ahead. Familiar with the way even in the darkness, he led them to the basement.

The door that had once been closed when they came with Graham Willhem now stared at them coldly.

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Chapter 388

“Nathan, the key?”

“Here it is.”

Nathan Zuckerman easily took the key from his pocket and opened the door. It wasn’t a difficult task for him, as Graham Willhem, who was originally in charge of this place, was now in disarray, and securing the key had been no trouble at all.

The sight inside the opened door was markedly different from before. The once dark but clean corridor was now filled with debris and filth, shattered and soiled all around.

‘From the looks of the debris still remaining, it seems that maintaining secrecy was prioritized over cleaning.’

There was also another difference. Despite being the same structure, everywhere they looked felt much larger and more expansive than before. Yuder guessed that this was probably due to the protective magic on this basement having been broken.

‘According to the information Nathan Zuckerman obtained when he infiltrated here alone before, the Star of Nagran had reached halfway before escaping, so the magic that had been in place must have shattered a lot at that time.’

It was fortunate, then, that this made entering all the more comfortable for them.

“The protective magic near the entrance has been mostly shattered. There are no signs of reinforcement, so we’ll proceed as is.”

Kishiar, who had been looking around, also agreed with Yuder's assessment. They began to move forward cautiously and silently. Although there were many rooms in the basement, Kishiar said there was no need to examine all of them.

"The secret passage is connected to only one room here."

"How do we find that room?"

"We don't have to do anything."

Why else would he have sent the First Prince Pruelle to Graham Willhem, if not to eliminate such a waste of time? Kishiar answered confidently and continued to lead the way until he stopped at a certain spot.

"You see that door inside, with the deer's antler decoration?"

"Yes."

Next to the door Kishiar pointed to, there was a candle holder decorated with a deer's antler. All the doors had similar decorations, but only that one was in the shape of a deer's antler.

"That's the place, he said."

However, Kishiar did not head there right away. He busily moved his gaze around, reading something unseen.

"But… it seems like the flow of magic energy around here is twisted. If part of the spatial protective magic is destroyed, it affects the rest, making it a headache. …Nathan."

"Yes."

"The core of the protective magic formation is in that room over there. Take this and handle it."

“Understood.”

Kishiar took out a magic tool inlaid with a magic stone and tossed it to Nathan. Without hesitation, Nathan Zuckerman drew his sword and headed toward the place Kishiar had pointed out. The protective magic, which had lost some of its original power, revealed itself to warn the unauthorized intruder but was woefully insufficient to stop Nathan. With light footwork, he dodged the magic formation rising from the floor and, at times, swung his sword to easily destroy it, successfully opening the door and entering.

Soon, the flow of air surrounding them changed sharply. The flow of magic energy had altered.

“It’s done now.”

Without even looking to see if Nathan Zuckerman had returned, Kishiar who had discerned the result raised his hand and began to mutter something under his breath. Golden magic energy arose around him, and an untimely wind began to swirl.

At that moment, Yuder felt a tingling sensation in his left eye, which had turned black, and stiffened his shoulder.

‘…What is this?’

Without a moment to ponder the sensation, the magic that flowed from Kishiar’s hand filled the surrounding space, casting a bright light. Yuder blinked his tingling left eye and turned his head. When the light disappeared, his left eye was as tranquil as if nothing had ever happened. Even if he casually touched his eye, only the unchanging, pitch-black darkness would spread out; he couldn’t see anything different.

“Why is that?” Kishiar, having finished the magic, turned and asked.

“It’s nothing.” Yuder shook his head in reassurance.

“Speak up if something feels strange.”

Only after shaking his head repeatedly did Kishiar fully conclude the magic and move on.

“I’ve temporarily halted the protection and alert spells, so now let’s open the secret door.”

Heading toward the stag-horn ornament, Kishiar nonchalantly raised his hand to it. After grabbing and turning the decoration one full circle, then two in the opposite direction and letting go, a moment later, a heavy, rumbling sound from within the wall was heard.

After the sound echoed for a while, Kishiar opened the previously sealed door. Surprisingly, it was not an ordinary room but the entrance to a staircase leading downward.

‘Quite a contraption they’ve made.’

At first glance, these were devices that had been carefully crafted a very long time ago. They began to descend the stairs. What they subsequently came upon was a long, dark corridor. It was clear from its cleanliness that the Star of Nagran hadn’t reached this far.

‘The secret trade goods that Duke Tain wanted so desperately to hide must be here.’

The underground passage was longer than they thought. As if judging that there was no need to be on guard this far in, there were no notable dangers in the passage. As they walked, Yuder roughly gauged the direction and distance. It was hard to pinpoint the direction in an unlit basement, but it seemed certain that they were heading in the direction of the adjacent street they had previously noted.

“The way up is in sight.”

Nathan Zuckerman muttered in a low voice. Just as he said, a stairway leading up was visible not far off. It was the end of the passage.

They descended the stairs and opened the door at the end. Beyond the silently opened gap, it was pitch dark, and no signs of life were felt. Yuder raised his hand, smelling the unique scent of a basement, and conjured a very small flame so as not to feel suffocated. Soon, part of the interior was revealed under the light.

‘This is…’

They had entered a massive underground warehouse. Numerous items, similar to the magic tools they had seen earlier in the Red Deer Consortium, were neatly organized.

Yuder noticed that the items here were classified into sections according to some criteria. In some places, only shimmering magic stones were laid, and in others, only magic tools likely made from such stones were stacked.

However, the first place Kishiar headed was not toward such eye-catching items but an area where shabby bags filled with something were stacked. Drawing his sword, he slightly pierced a bag, and white powder streamed out. Seeing him rub the powder between his fingers and taste it with his tongue, Yuder unintentionally raised his voice.

“It’s dangerous.”

“It’s fine at this level. Hmm… just as I thought, this is Calanesa.”

Wiping his hand, Kishiar looked down at the bag, his eyes devoid of warmth.

“Do you know what Calanesa is, assistant?”

“…I do not.”

In truth, he knew, but that was the correct answer to give here. Calming his heavy heart, he responded, and Kishiar casually turned his body and answered.

“It’s a drug with quite an effective painkilling component, but no one uses it for analgesics. Its hallucinogenic and addictive qualities are excessively strong, making it hard to handle, and overuse can even lead to death by shock.”

“…”

“When it began to sneak in from other countries a few years ago, it was imported in the form of a leaf. This powdered form, however, is something I’m seeing for the first time.”

It was a dangerous drug, boldly named after Ponesa, as it reminded one of Ponesa’s excellent analgesic component.

However, unlike Ponesa, which was strictly managed by the imperial family, Calanesa was smuggled in from other countries and indiscriminately spread in various forms. Yuder had first seen this drug in a case of illegal fighting in the South in his previous life, but since then, the drug had secretly spread among the nobles, treated as a mysterious and fun plaything.

Attending parties, one often saw people languidly stretched out, smoking cigarettes laced with Calanesa or drinking alcohol. Their unique bitter smell and nauseating appearance were common, but those who criticized such behavior were strangely regarded as ignorant.

‘Looking back now, the odds are high that this was where it all began.’

At a glance, there were countless bags. With that amount, it could have supplied the entire empire for several years at least.

His teeth ground together at the memory of Graham Willhem's nonsense, saying that despite hiding these things, most of the basement was empty.

"We probably don't need to look at the other items. This is indeed the mid-point of the secret trade of the Tain Duke."

"What do you think we should do now?"

The Tain Duke was likely planning to move or sell the items here through secret auctions and parties. Since the existence of the sought-after items was confirmed, waiting until the planned moment to strike would be the best course of action. However, even knowing that, the sight of the bags of Calanesa in front of him brought feelings of discomfort and unease to the forefront.

"Let's go up and check our position first."

Kishiar said, looking around leisurely as he spoke.

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Chapter 389

“Let’s come back tomorrow.”

“Why tomorrow?”

“We can’t just sit around doing nothing until the auction, can we?”

The words that flowed from Kishiar’s mouth were in perfect accord with what Yuder had been thinking. Knowing well that Kishiar had no ability to read minds, Yuder hesitated momentarily. Kishiar noticed this hesitation and sent a knowing smile.

“It seems my assistant might be feeling more regret than I am.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“What is there to be sorry about? I actually brought you here, hoping for that kind of reaction.”

‘You brought me here hoping for that?’ Yuder looked up, surprised by these unexpected words. A soft question reached his ears, as if to confirm that he hadn’t misheard.

“Why do you think I brought an assistant who hasn’t fully recovered to such a place?”

“That’s because…”

Yuder, who had not specifically questioned that fact, trailed off.

“I assumed you brought me because I’m your assistant.”

“That’s not entirely wrong,” Kishiar said, laughing quietly.

“There are two reasons. Based on the information obtained by Prince Pruelle, I judged that there wouldn’t be much danger this time. That’s the first reason. And the second reason is that I wanted to help you gain experience in this area.”

“…”

“Both Nathan and the Knights of Peletta have done this sort of thing quite often, but it’s a first for the Cavalry. I have no doubt in the competence of my assistant, but you lack this kind of experience, so I thought it would be good to bring you along.”

Yuder hadn’t realized that Kishiar had brought him for such a reason.

‘…No wonder Nathan was unusually reticent during the entire journey.’

It seemed he had guessed from the start that Yuder had been brought along for that purpose.

Kishiar in his previous life had decided on Yuder as the next Commander and taught him many things, but it had always been a one-sided education, not a flexible experience like this. Though Yuder no longer needed such instruction, the feeling was strangely fresh and unusual.

Kishiar, noticing Yuder’s strange expression, narrowed his eyes and spoke, “Don’t worry. Since we’ve come this far, we won’t just leave.”

The moment Yuder heard that gentle yet cold voice, the unpleasant flame of emotion that had been burning inside him silently extinguished. It was a surprisingly firm response.

If Kishiar had said so, there was no need to worry anymore. More than anything, it was evidence that a solid trust existed within Yuder.

“Now, let’s find the exit.”

They dispersed for a moment to find the ascending exit. Navigating through the darkness of the vast, cluttered warehouse was a difficult task, but the three people there could handle it with ease.

Yuder walked along the endless rows of shelves, heading towards the area where the magic stones were kept. Everywhere he looked, palm-sized, brilliantly colored top-grade magic stones lay scattered like ordinary pebbles. A scene that would have made the eyes of not only mages but also ordinary people flip with greed, yet Yuder’s gaze was colder than those who had carelessly collected and stored the magic stones there.

Large magic stones of that size were primarily processed for decorative purposes rather than for use in magic. Being as beautiful as jewels and possessing a mysterious power known as magic, they were the perfect collection items for the wealthy. Yuder could not understand those who became enthusiastic about collecting magic stones, nor those who attributed meaning to them, but there was one exception. It was the red magic stone staff bestowed upon him by the Emperor of Katchian after successfully completing his ‘first secret mission.’

In fact, the item was of no use to an Awakener. Unlike mages, the Awakeners did not utilize magic power. Though it might have some use if already processed into a magic tool, in its pure magic stone form, it was merely a useless ornament. The black thornwood that held it was also not the commonly used white birch or the noble applewood favored by the Founding Emperor, but rather a wood that was prone to decay and weakness, and thus not often used in fine craftsmanship.

Emperor Katchian must have known that the magic stone staff would not be of much use to Yuder. But if the Emperor had bestowed

it as a symbol of the Commander of the Cavalry, such a point could not be dwelt upon.

White Commander’s uniform, and a black thornwood staff embedded with a red magic stone.

These soon became the famous symbols people thought of when they heard the name Yudrain Aile.

Being the Commander of the Cavalry was neither joyful nor happy, but Yuder never intended to voluntarily let go of those items, at least until death. Though the position was forced upon him by Kishiar, and Emperor Katchian had deliberately offered useless ornaments, once they became his responsibility, he naturally considered them his duty. Like the Cavalry he thought he should carry and lead, the staff was also a pride that Yuder, who never coveted other things, stubbornly maintained.

‘Now that I think about it, it was more like an obsession than pride.’

He never regretted the moments he spent sensing the anomalies of the world and trying to solve them. But he had never felt such intense anger and emptiness as when he found out that the things he had protected were taken away by someone else.

But now even such emotions had disappeared. After dying and coming back, what Yuder had shed was not merely the position of Commander, but perhaps also the weight of the white uniform and the staff that he may not have realized he was bearing.

They say that no matter how excellent a person is, they can’t see the back of their own head. Perhaps this saying was meant for such cases.

While walking with these thoughts, Yuder suddenly stopped and fixed his gaze on a shelf. He thought he saw a bothersome red glow

beneath the faint light of a small flame.

"…"

He thought it was an illusion and increased the size of the flame, but it wasn't. Among the magic stones here, an unusually large red stone radiated brilliant light. There was no way he would not recognize an object he had been familiar with for so long. It was the very magic stone that had been embedded in the staff Yudrain Aile had possessed.

'… Just because I thought of the staff, I didn't expect to run into it here.'

He was startled, but then again, what did it matter if he saw it again? That thing was now just an ordinary magic stone, having nothing to do with Yuder.

'But that aside, its presence here… Does it mean that someone offered Emperor Katchian a magic stone that had been illegally traded in my previous life?'

It was probably someone on the side of a foreign operation, with a high likelihood. Although he had suspected that Emperor Katchian might not be entirely unrelated to the secret trade of the foreign operation, seeing the evidence blatantly exposed in front of him felt somewhat sordid.

"What are you looking at so intently?"

At that moment, a voice suddenly rang out from behind. Startled, Yuder turned his head to find Kishiar, who was looking at the magic stone that Yuder himself had been observing, and quietly exhaled.

"…When did you arrive? At least give me some warning."

“I came, making sure to make noise with my footsteps, but you didn’t notice at all.”

Yuder, having nothing to say to that, quickly changed the subject.

“Have you found the exit?”

“Nathan found it. He said he’d go take a look first, so I came back to fetch the assistant in the meantime.”

Kishiar, in responding, skillfully turned the topic back to the magic stone.

“But why were you staring at that magic stone so intently? Was there something odd about it?”

“No, it’s just…”

Yuder turned his gaze back to the stone and then closed his mouth. He couldn’t say that he was looking at the reward he had received after killing Kishiar La Orr.

“I was simply looking at it for a moment, thinking that it might have something different about it because it’s larger than other magic stones.”

“It certainly is big.”

Kishiar, accepting the explanation, picked it up without hesitation.

“While the latent magic within it is more than other magic stones, there’s nothing else special about it. Do you like it?”

“No.”

Without a second thought, Yuder shook his head.

“I don’t like it at all. I have no intention of ever holding a magic stone that looks like that.”

Kishiar’s playful expression was withdrawn, perhaps sensing that the response was too earnest. Yuder turned away from Kishiar’s gaze. He didn’t want to look at those red eyes, so similar to the magic stone’s, side by side.

“Are you here?”

Returning to where they had been initially, Nathan Zuckerman approached with a calm face.

“The exit is over there. I went halfway up and felt human presence from the upper floor, so I came back down for now.”

The stairs that Nathan Zuckerman had discovered were hidden behind a shelf full of rolled-up papers. Opening the door and following it upwards, they began to faintly hear human activity and voices from afar, growing more distinct as they ascended.

‘…What’s taking so long to get a beer! I told you to get it from the third barrel, how many times…’

‘Are the new dishes ready yet?…’

From the snippets of sound, they were able to deduce what was behind the door.

“…It seems to be a tavern.”

“It appears so.”

The voices behind the door grew more distant and then disappeared. After the silence had lingered for a short while, Kishiar lightly knocked on the door. A solid, heavy sound resonated.

“It seems to be a door disguised as a wall… Made so it can’t be easily opened from the inside. Let’s try pushing it.”

“I’ll do it.”

Yuder volunteered, but Kishiar shook his head.

“Arm strength alone won’t do it. Fortunately, the power I possess is suitable for such tasks.”

At that moment, Yuder recalled the Awakener power that Kishiar possessed: the ability to push and pull things.

As he remembered this, the door began to rotate heavily without Kishiar even lifting a finger. It didn’t take long for a gap wide enough for a person to slip through to appear.

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As suspected, outside the wall was the basement of a tavern.

The smell of old wooden barrels and a haphazard pile of groceries pricked their noses. After the three of them had all emerged, the wall closed again. Looking at it from the outside, one could never have guessed that there was a hidden door.

They took advantage of a moment when no one was paying attention and entered the first floor. The place was packed, and the crowded tables gave no indication that someone had just emerged from the basement.

“I think I know where we are,” Nathan Zuckerman muttered quietly, looking around.

“We’ve been investigating the entertainment district, and this is one of the places we’ve looked into. It’s a mid-point hub.”

“Are you new guests?”

At that moment, someone mistook them for customers and spoke up. Kishiar, his face disguised, calmly turned his head and replied.

“Yes. But it seems there are no seats available.”

“Seats can be made. Hey, squeeze over there!”

The man pushed the drinkers seated in the corner, and soon enough, space for three was created. As soon as Kishiar sat down, he casually asked for menu recommendations, even ordering three glasses of a local fruit liquor known to be quite potent. While the waiter was gone to fetch the food, Yuder quietly observed the surroundings.

The first thing that reached his ears were the loud voices of the drinkers next to them.

“Hey! The city gates are finally open, so we can drink, but it’s so crowded we can’t even breathe.”

“It’s because of all the newcomers from outside Tainu.”

“Oh, because of that auction thing?”

“Yes. There were people who just came from afar to stay at the second-floor inn. So, don’t pick a fight with those who look like mercenaries. It’s dangerous.”

The drinkers, glancing at the tall, large Kishiar and Nathan, became a bit intimidated and quieted down.

“They must think we’re mercenaries here for the auction. It’s surprising that rumors have spread this far already,” Kishiar also murmured, chuckling quietly.

“I didn’t know that people from the consortium were already coming in.”

“Neither did I. I was not aware of any reports about those who entered Tainu claiming to be from the consortium. Right, Nathan?”

“…Yes. I’ll check again on what’s going on.”

It was Ever and Nathan’s responsibility to track those coming into Tainu for the auction or party. Nathan Zuckerman, his face hidden beneath his cloak’s hood, looked sharply more focused.

“How will you return?”

“We can’t go back the way we came, so we’ll have to start from here. We haven’t received any contact yet from those waiting on the consortium’s side……”

“…Are those guys the people from the consortium?”

“Yes. Look at their hands. They are definitely southerners.”

Yuder, while listening to the voices of Nathan Zuckerman and Kishiar and idly looking at the food and drink in front of him, turned his head toward the mumbling voices of the drinkers beside them. Three people were descending from the second-floor lodging. Their faces were hidden by thick clothing as if it were midwinter, but their hands, peeking out from the sleeves, were all red.

‘These who came from afar and are affiliated with the consortium… Are they southerners?’

This place was a tavern and inn with a hidden door leading to Tainu’s secret warehouse. If the merchants who came to stay here were southerners, there could be only one guess. Turning his head, he saw that Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman were also looking in the same direction.

“…Commander.”

“Let’s watch for now.”

The merchants from the southern lands were standing by the counter, as if waiting for someone. Shortly after, an elderly man emerged from the kitchen and began speaking to the person standing at the front of the group. Even as he engaged in conversation, he was giving directions to the food servers, indicating that he must be the owner of the tavern.

‘I can hardly hear what they’re saying because of the noise.’

He was contemplating whether to use the power of the wind and leaning his head in when suddenly one of the southern merchants turned his head sharply. His gaze was directed precisely towards the corner where Yuder was.

‘He’s more observant than most.’

A chill ran down his back, but Yuder casually raised his hand, pretending to call the server to take his order. The southern merchant’s gaze, which had been scanning in Yuder’s direction, was obscured by the approaching staff and soon disappeared.

“Would you like to order anything else?”

It was a different person than the one who took his order earlier. In the weary voice, a fleeting wariness towards strangers was discernible. Yuder, while peering over the server’s shoulder at the southern merchants heading towards the basement with the old man, casually replied:

“Another glass of this liquor.”

“You hardly touched what’s already in front of you, and you’re asking for more?”

Yuder lifted the glass in front of him, downed it in one gulp, and slammed it back down.

“Now it’s empty.”

The strong alcohol spread a potent scent down his throat, but it would have no effect on him anyway. The man looked at the glass Yuder had put down, blinked, and with a frown turned away, grumbling.

“I’ve seen plenty of braggarts who think they can drink, but this is the first madman to down that in one gulp…”

Whatever he said didn’t matter; Yuder had achieved his aim of avoiding the southern merchants’ eyes. Yuder ignored his grumbling, hastily wiping his wet lips and looking over at Kishiar.

“…Commander, shall we follow them?”

“I was thinking of doing so… Is it alright to drink so suddenly?”

Kishiar asked with a face trying to suppress laughter. What had made him so amused was a mystery.

“I don’t get drunk on such things, so it’s fine.”

“That’s something I’d like to ask in detail, but… Wait. They’re back.”

Of course, that didn’t mean the server who took their order had returned. The southern merchants and the old owner had somehow returned from the basement. Judging by their leisurely pace and demeanor, it seemed that no one had noticed any intruders.

They exchanged a few more words and then dispersed. The owner headed back to his kitchen, and the southern merchants went to the inn on the second floor. Kishiar’s eyes, camouflaged in ordinary brown, didn’t miss their retreating figures.

“…It was wise to order Prince Pruelle to investigate. Keep a close watch on their movements as well, Nathan.”

“Yes.”

“Now, let’s get up.”

Kishiar stood up and pulled a coin from his pocket, placing it on the table. It was more than the cost of the meal.

“Isn’t that too much to leave?”

“I don’t skimp on the price of a good spectacle.”

If drinking a strong liquor in one gulp was a good spectacle, then shouldn’t that money go to Yuder? However, since Kishiar was the

one paying, Yuder didn’t say anything more.

They left the tavern and looked around the area. Nathan Zuckerman took the lead, saying that the Red Deer Consortium headquarters building was not far from there, and began to walk. When they soon arrived back in front of the headquarters building, the Peletta Knights guarding the entrance were startled, their eyes wide open, as if they had seen a ghost.

“My, my lord? What has happened? It’s been almost 2 hours, so I was about to contact you…”

“So it has. Everything went well, so don’t worry. Where did we leave the carriage?”

They returned to the mansion of Baron Willhem just as they had arrived, by carriage. Nathan Zuckerman, dressed as a coachman, politely saluted and disappeared first, and Yuder headed for the lodging with Kishiar.

During their walk in the darkness of the night, Kishiar remained silent. Yuder, too, was lost in thought about the southern merchants who had already revealed themselves and the secret warehouse, and did not speak first.

‘I said we would come back tomorrow. I’m sure Kishiar has something planned in advance… but what is he trying to do?’

The fact that the southern merchants had already come here and located the warehouse was evidence of Duke Tain’s impatience. Pruelle had said they were just ordinary merchants, but the southern merchants they had met did not seem so simple.

‘Southern merchants… People I have never seen in my previous life…’

In his previous life, when Emperor Katchian was working hard to revitalize the west through trade, the Orr Empire had quite a bit of interaction with the South. The impression of the South among the countries north of the desert was traditionally not good, so it was very surprising. The South was a strange and mysterious place, divided into numerous tribes, with languages and social systems completely different from those of the countries north of the desert. Just as the countries north of the desert had disliked them since the old White Sand Wars, they had also long been distrustful and closed their doors to the northern nations.

Although Emperor Katchian's policy had ended in failure, the South had begun to use that event as a stepping stone to slowly restore diplomatic relations with the countries north of the desert. In that sense, they might have been very grateful to Emperor Katchian.

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‘Engaging with the southern countries was something unimaginable currently for the states north of the desert.’

Initially, those who had vehemently opposed engagement with the southern countries began to quiet down gradually as, under Emperor Katchian’s resolute will, trade and investment started to flow. Long-standing beliefs were less important than the immediate benefits before their eyes.

Subsequently, envoys from the southern countries became common sights in the Orr Empire and other countries. Visitors from the South to the imperial palace of Orr were, like others, quite interested in the famous Cavalry commander Yuder Aile, but Emperor Katchian did not want Yuder to make contact with them.

At that time, though late, efforts were also being made in different countries to form organizations like Cavalry to accommodate the countless Awakeners who had sprung up across the continent. Emperor Katchian was always on edge, fearing that envoys from other countries, including the South, might extract information about the Cavalry or the Awakener management system.

Although the Emperor was not the originator of the Cavalry, highly praised for being the first to recognize and positively control the Awakener’s power, he wanted to hold that glory in his hands for a long time. Even though it was no less prestigious or powerful, Yudrain Aile’s activities were mostly constrained and continued only behind the scenes; there was a context for this.

At that time, there was neither the desire to interact with others nor the thought that moving inconspicuously would be better for the future of the Awakener and the Cavalry, so it seemed acceptable.

After all, what good would it do to stand out for an institution that existed for Emperor Katchian and the Orr Empire?

But now, that choice seemed regrettable. If more interest had been placed in the South and other matters, work would have been much easier now. The fact that the unknown would not be filled even if time were turned back became increasingly frustrating.

‘It’s a shame, but… there’s no helping it.’

What was important now was not Emperor Katchian or suspicious southern merchants of the past, but to prevent dangerous goods brought by someone’s scheme from spreading throughout the Empire. There was not enough time to focus only on assisting Kishiar and ensuring that he was safe.

Yuder folded his concerns and reminiscences about unknown southern merchants and looked back at Kishiar. The face that had been transformed by a magic tool reverted to its usual smooth and beautiful appearance. But what reflected in Yuder’s eyes were traces of faint moisture, twinkling dimly on the forehead beneath the golden hair.

He narrowed his eyes to look more closely at it, and simultaneously Kishiar turned his head and met his gaze. The reflexive smile on his face, narrowing his eyes, was radiant enough that one could not think he had been roaming dangerous places late at night.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“… I was thinking about how the Commander will handle the secret warehouse tomorrow.”

Yuder quickly changed the subject.

“Was that really bothering you?”

“One cannot follow without knowing anything, right?”

“That’s true.”

Smoothly answering, Kishiar took off the black cloak he had been wearing as soon as he stepped into the residence.

“The task is simple. We will go there tomorrow and switch the items.”

The man, who had quickly erased traces of his night’s outing and returned entirely to his usual self as the Duke Peletta, informed Yuder in a calm voice. Yuder was silent for a moment and then slowly questioned back.

“If I’m not mistaken, I remember there being far too many items in that warehouse for the three of us to handle, right…?”

“That’s right.”

“Is there a way to switch out all those items in a short amount of time?”

“Indeed. No doubt about it.”

Kishiar grinned and gestured. It meant to come closer. Since there was no one inside the lodging, there was no need to speak secretly, but without understanding what he wanted to do, he took a step forward anyway.

“Come closer.”

“…”

Yuder sighed and approached right in front of Kishiar. As soon as he did, an extended hand reached out and pulled him in as though dancing, and when he came to his senses, he was seated on Kishiar’s knee.

Sitting on the firm thigh, embracing his waist, feeling the touch of hair on the back of his neck, the sensations of his previous life felt overwhelmingly intense.

'…Whether then or now, his way of teasing is utterly the same.'

What had changed, however, was that if it had been before, Yuder would have struggled to rise immediately after such an act. But now, he sighed and obediently surrendered.

If Kishiar wanted to talk in this position, it was not something he couldn't accommodate.

"I thought you'd say something, but you're silent?"

"If you want me to be surprised, I can still look surprised now."

"No. That's fine."

A smiling voice came from right behind his neck. A laugh that seemed to dissolve one's defenses and soften the heart.

Then, a deep breath as though smelling a fragrance came from behind him, and somehow, his mood became utterly relaxed.

'…Ah. So that's it.'

Yuder suddenly realized something. The sensations from this act were not simply due to similar experiences in his previous life. The short and intense contact Kishiar had shown when his magic had overflowed and he had sought Yuder late at night was surprisingly similar to what he was feeling now.

After all, considering that throughout their brief night out Kishiar had used magic and magic tools, even tapping into the power of the Awakener, it must have been more tiring than usual, even though it

didn’t appear so. Magic was more exhausting to use than other powers.

‘The fact that Nathan Zuckerman did not show great concern means there must be no problem, but…’

The moisture he had glimpsed on Kishiar’s forehead earlier was undoubtedly sweat, not a mistake.

“…”

In the rhythmic beating of his heart, mixed with irregularly jumping emotions, words were taken from Yuder. He waited for Kishiar’s words, his mouth tightly closed.

“…We don’t need to prepare anything for the switch. The many items in that warehouse will help us.”

“…”

“Do you understand what I mean?”

Indeed, he seemed to understand.

Thinking of the numerous magic tools and magic stones piled up inside the warehouse, a spark-like revelation flashed through his mind.

‘He plans to use the magic stones and magic tools there to make the switch.’

Magic tools could be used by those with almost no magic power. If one had magic power, they could use the magic within the tools more powerfully and delicately, but even without that, the magic of the magic stones that acted as the core of the tools could easily be harnessed. If it wasn’t a disposable magic tool, even if the magic

within was exhausted, one could use a similar level of magic stone to reuse it.

And within that warehouse, there were countless magic tools endowed with various powers, and magic stones that could continuously supply energy even when the energy of those tools was exhausted!

Yuder turned his head and faced the playful smile of the man embracing him. This time, he could not help but admire the man's cunning purely.

"…Did you have that idea in the brief moment we entered the warehouse?"

"Don't forget that I have a particular expertise in collecting magic tools. The biggest reason people use magic tools is to easily accomplish things that can't be done with human power."

Among magic tools, the most common were those endowed with the power of storage-related magic that allowed valuable items to be stored in a small space. Next in commonality were tools with camouflage-related magic, which hid nobles' treasures from the eyes of intruders.

No matter how whimsical a new magic tool might be, it could not threaten the supremacy of those two types. For nobles who found it difficult to employ mages, there was nothing as convenient as magic tools.

"With me around, it won't take long, and we can finish the job very comfortably."

Who would have imagined that someone like Kishiar would come in and pull off such a trick? Kishiar, thinking of the incident he would cause tomorrow, added with a low chuckle.

“But for Calanesa… I’m thinking of a more direct replacement. Unlike other items, camouflage alone seems to be difficult.”

“The white powder is easy to obtain, so there won’t be a problem.”

“You always understand twice as much from a single word.”

Yuder looked down at his hand with Kishiar and let out a faint, satisfied smile.

‘…Just thinking about it is refreshing.’

However, the fact that Kishiar would have to use his strength again tomorrow for that refreshing success was not so pleasing.

The event would take place the next night, so there was time until then. Yuder resolved to visit Hellem and Mick’s residence during the day, where Enon might be.

‘I’m curious if Ever and the others have found out what Baron Willhem is up to in the security management team.’

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Seeing that there had been no particular contact so far, Yuder figured it must have been handled well, but he couldn't help but worry about the Cavalry members, even though he knew better.

"Since you've answered what you'll do tomorrow, may I ask one thing now?"

A small voice reached Yuder's ears. Yuder turned his eyes towards the warmth of the man who still had his head buried in the nape of his neck.

"Is there something you're curious about?"

"What's the secret of being able to down a strong drink in one gulp without getting drunk?"

"…Is that what you're so curious about?"

"It's about you."

A sudden yet obvious statement, spoken as if it was nothing unusual, stirred the air and tingled Yuder's skin. Yuder looked down at the strong, large hand around his waist, briefly pondering how much and what exactly to say.

It didn't take long to respond.

"It's as I've told you. Ordinary alcohol doesn't make me drunk."

"Ordinary, you say… So it's not like you never get drunk."

"Yes. Well…"

To get drunk, he needed alcohol mixed with monster blood, not ordinary liquor.

He first realized this when he attended a party and drank a poisoned drink sent by someone targeting him. Unlike other toxins, which had no effect like water or ordinary beverages, Yuder had understood for the first time what it meant to be ‘drunk’ when he drank that alcohol. The sensation of deadened emotions awakening and the flames igniting inside his cold flesh brought considerable shock to his body, long devoid of human warmth.

Subsequent investigation revealed that the poison in that drink included some monster blood. His body’s lowered resistance to monsters allowed the intoxication to creep in. Unlike normal poisons, there was no other problem, and since discovering this, Yuder would keep that drink and occasionally consume it alone when he wanted to experience the sensation of intoxication. That daring image added another stroke to all sorts of sinister rumors surrounding the dark-haired commoner-born Omega Cavalry Commander.

But there was no need to tell Kishiar that he couldn’t get drunk unless it was that particular poisoned drink. To explain it would require telling the story of drinking the poisoned liquor, a subject not yet open for discussion.

Between what could be said and what couldn’t, as the frail boundary became increasingly blurred, Kishiar’s soft whisper reached him.

“Yes… The pleasure of the drink we shared last time was too brief to truly understand the limits. How do you feel about taking time to more leisurely gauge each other’s tolerance once this matter is over?”

It was clear when he referred to “last time.” It was the story of the Lyung wine, where they had gloriously sacrificed one sofa in their

lodgings. Without realizing it, Yuder caught his glance, almost drifting towards the newly replaced sofa.

“…Yes. If you call, I will come.”

Though the response was stiff, it wasn’t difficult for a perceptive man to realize what had briefly crossed Yuder’s mind before that answer. A bright laugh sounded near Yuder’s nape.

“Good. I’ll look forward to it.”

Despite both discussing future matters, there was a significant difference between planning and anticipation. The hand that had been around Yuder’s waist regained its strength, and the tired breath seemed to revive with vigor.

Contrary to the weightiness inherent in a plan, there was no weight to expectation. It was fine whether fulfilled or unfulfilled. But Kishiar La Orr was strangely awakened to the fact that what breathed warmth into him was exactly that future-oriented ‘expectation.’ He hesitated for a moment, then cautiously asked.

“Have you regained some strength?”

“Ah, you caught me?”

Kishiar, who responded coolly, smiled bitterly.

“I’m sorry if I seem to have worried you, but it’s all right. There are not many chances to moderately wield the powers we possess, so I wanted to test them when I could.”

“You mean you wanted to use both magic power and the power of the Awakener together?”

“Yes. You can’t know anything without trying it firsthand. I’ll have to bear it.”

Kishiar’s eyes seemed to be looking far away as he spoke. Born with enormous powers that were hard for his physical body to manage, he was living an ironic life where he couldn’t utilize them properly. However, that didn’t mean he had ever given up on what he possessed. He knew better than anyone that living quietly would be easiest, yet the will within Kishiar’s eyes had never dimmed for a moment. That’s why he had been able to come this far.

To tell such a person to be more careful would only be an insult to his determination. Yuder swallowed the words that had risen to his throat and instead wished more intensely for his own recovery.

‘I need to recover as soon as possible, at least before the day of the auction.’

…

The next day, as soon as morning dawned, Finn Eldore knocked on the door. He was a messenger sent by Ever, from the security management team.

“Did you find out everything about what Baron Willhem did at the security management team last night?”

“Yes. It wasn’t much different from what you anticipated.”

Baron Willhem had secretly visited the Knight Commander Jeymer Phil at the security management team the previous night. Though he had hidden his identity under shabby clothes and a cloak, he couldn’t avoid the eyes of the Cavalry. After quickly finishing his conversation with the Knight Commander, he descended to the underground dungeon, carrying a heavy bag, with only a lame servant in tow.

Ever, accompanied by Emun, who was good at hiding his presence in the dark, Jody, who was sensitive to sound, along with Finn in case of emergency, had secretly trailed Baron Willhem. It

wouldn’t have been too difficult to follow two ordinary people from a distance, except that the guard’s shift change gave them the chance to descend to the third underground floor.

To everyone’s astonishment, the Baron suddenly disappeared at the end of the wall on the third floor. Some time later, he reappeared empty-handed, without the bag, and nonchalantly returned to his mansion. The Cavalry members, hidden in the darkness conjured by Emun’s abilities, all clearly witnessed him vanishing and then returning.

“It seems the wall Yuder discovered was indeed the door to a hidden passage leading to a concealed space,” one of them reported.

After Baron Willhem left, those who went to examine the wall he had disappeared into found a faint bloodstain near a carved family crest. It seemed hastily wiped but not entirely cleaned.

“Bloodstains. The ‘Protection of blood’ must indeed be strong.”

Concluding the matter, Kishiar gave Finn some directions to pass on to Ever, thanking him for the hard work. Yuder, who had gone out to wait while the conversation extended, approached Finn as he came out after the report.

“Finn, I called for a carriage for your ride back.”

“Huh? I’m fine. Thanks, Yuder.”

A boy with a face identical to the absent Hinn gave a faint smile and honestly extended his thanks.

“It should be me thanking you. You came to help me when I was being investigated, but I’ve been so preoccupied since then that I never properly thanked you.”

“What’s the big deal? I just did what needed to be done.”

Although he had often seen the Eldore siblings together, it was almost his first time having a conversation like this with an individual. However, there was no need to fret about the topic of conversation. This was because Finn started talking with a cheerful face about the “small retribution” that he had been giving to the Tainu Knights since the incident during the investigation.

“…I’m glad I listened to Yuder at that time. Knight Commander Phil really enjoys being teased. Whenever I say something, he shivers so much, it’s as if winter has come around him.”

“It’s a shame I couldn’t see it myself.”

“Right? If we go together now, we can see it. Want to come?”

“I have something to do right now.”

As he answered, embedding his sincere regret, Finn laughed cheerfully. Yuder opened his mouth after momentarily gazing at his bright and innocent face.

“Recently, are you okay?”

Since coming here, Finn had been somewhat drained for a while. It was understandable, as he was separated from his sister Hinn for the first time since birth. But as he looked after the memory-lost ones with Lusan and gradually regained his strength, he was completely engrossed in teasing the Tainu Knights, and it seemed he had fully recovered his former zeal.

‘Still, the difficulty he must feel from being separated from his kin wouldn’t have completely disappeared.’

“Me? Of course, I’m fine.”

The boy, catching right away what Yuder meant, answered brightly.

“Rather, everyone is being too considerate; it’s a little strange. According to the letters from Hinn, she feels the same way, but I never thought Yuder would be worrying as well. I’ll have to write this in the next letter.”

Yuder, watching the excited boy, kept silent for a moment and then opened his mouth.

“That offer I made earlier. Do you still remember it?”

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The chattering mouth that had been prattling on suddenly clamped shut. Round eyes peeping through blue strands of hair looked at Yuder with a new excitement and anticipation.

“…A proposal for the right to appoint an aide?”

Yuder did not respond verbally, but quietly nodded his head.

Finn still remembered the short conversation he had heard previously at the Western Mage Union base in Great Sarain Forest, along with Hinn and Gakane.

“I remember, of course. But why? Are you planning to give it to me already?”

“If I am, would you consider accepting?”

Excitement surged through Finn’s parted lips. The boy, whose soft cheeks had turned red like a young animal, seemed as if he would nod his head at any moment, but he did not forget his caution, curious as to why such a sudden offer was being made.

“Are you making this offer to me alone, or is it also for Hinn and Gakane in Great Sarain Forest?”

“It’s a proposal made first to you. Those two are not here.”

“Aha. You mean you need someone here to aid Yuder.”

Finn’s eyes narrowed as he quickly grasped the unspoken meaning.

Though the Eldore siblings sometimes appeared more naive and thoughtless than the youngest member in the Cavalry, in fact, their ability to read situations and judge matters was more exceptional than many adult members. It meant they hadn't lived as naively as they seemed.

"But why do you need help to the point of using the appointment right in advance?"

Yuder lowered his voice after confirming once again that no one was around.

"I'd like you to watch and investigate some people in Tainu on my behalf. Without anyone finding out. …Can you do it?"

"Of course I can! I'm confident!"

Finn exclaimed, thumping his chest.

"But who are these people in Tainu? Someone I've seen before?"

"No."

Yuder looked into Finn's sparkling eyes.

"…They are southern merchants who came here yesterday under Duke Tain's orders."

Last night, Yuder had seen southern merchants in a tavern and inn connected to a warehouse filled with Duke Tain's secret trade goods. Kishiar had instructed Nathan Zuckerman to watch them, but Yuder felt the need to investigate them separately.

It wasn't because he didn't trust Nathan Zuckerman and the Peletta Knights, but because he sensed an indescribable premonition from the way the southern merchants seemed to detect his presence unusually quickly.

‘I can’t be certain since I didn’t exert effort, but… I must consider the possibility that they might be Awakeners.’

The idea of appointing Finn as an aide in advance came from this reason. What Yuder wanted was a watchful eye to consistently monitor the southern merchants without anyone noticing. Finn was ideally suited for this task.

His unruly, mischievous demeanor meant he could move a bit freely among his colleagues without raising suspicions. He knew how to utilize his unassuming appearance and quick judgment, without exposing himself to danger.

He had planned to use the appointment right to gather individuals responsible for information gathering within the Cavalry, so advancing the start wouldn’t be a poor choice.

“The Commander has already told Zuckerman to watch them, but I think…”

“You mean it’s necessary for us to investigate on our own, aside from the Peletta Knights?”

Finn immediately caught on to Yuder’s intention and interjected.

“Yes. I’d prefer to do it myself, but I think it’s hard for me to pay attention to that right now, so I’d like to ask you.”

“Hmm… you know what? Yuder is really lucky.”

With eyes narrowed like a pleased cat, Finn suddenly grinned slyly and whispered.

“Actually, this was still a secret, but not long ago, I succeeded in using the teleportation ability by myself, you know? It would be perfect to use for this job, wouldn’t it?”

The Eldore siblings originally possessed the ability to teleport people or objects within a short range when they held hands. Yuder had heard that the ability had been expanding in terms of distance, but he didn't know it had developed to the point where they could use it separately.

Yuder, surprised by the development that had not occurred in his previous life, rarely opened his eyes wide, and Finn made a satisfied face at the reaction.

"How did you…"

"Remember when we all gathered to hear advice from Yuder about developing our abilities? Yuder told us that, for us, extending the range of our teleportation ability is important, but we should also train to be able to use it in any situation."

Of course, he remembered.

It happened just after he had been able to modify the Cavalry training methods. Many Cavalry members had come asking for personal advice to further develop their abilities, and Yuder had spent all day answering everyone. Of course, the Eldore siblings were among them.

"To use it in any situation, we first had to consider when we were not together, right? Actually, it hasn't worked so far, but it seems that being forced apart in Tainu helped us succeed."

Although this was not the meaning of being able to use it in any situation, the fact that they had finally succeeded in using their abilities separately was a remarkable achievement.

The result of Kishiar separating the Eldore siblings had blossomed this way. Perhaps he already knew something about the siblings' new challenge.

“Then what about Hinn?”

“Of course, Hinn succeeded too. She first did it when Gakane was injured and needed quick treatment, and the road was blocked. Amazing, right?”

That was news to him. The development of the other members had contributed to Gakane surviving instead of dying, unlike in the previous life.

“So when did you first succeed, Finn?”

“Me? I, um…”

Finn, who had been answering confidently, for the first time closed his mouth and playfully scrunched up his nose.

“When I went to help Yuder investigate the prison.”

He managed to leave with a promise for next time, but Finn was still in a state of residual anger against the Tainu Knights at that time. It was only natural that he wanted to throw a piece of dog dung, that he happened to find while heading to catch a carriage back to Baron Willhem’s mansion, under the knights’ feet.

“But that… actually worked, you know.”

Although it was a ridiculous reason, if the Eldore siblings had advanced one step further for the sake of their comrades, it was a good thing. Yuder praised them honestly.

“I see. Congratulations to both of you.”

“Thanks. But we still have a long way to go. We will find a way to develop further together with Hinn!”

Finn said he would act for the mission as soon as he returned to the security management team and conveyed Kishiar’s answer to

Ever. Yuder informed him of the location of the inn where the southern merchants were staying and their appearance, emphasizing not to approach them excessively.

“They seemed very sensitive to signs. Be careful.”

“Don’t worry. If we intend to, no one can suspect us. Ah, of course, it’s just me for now.”

Some time had passed since Hinn had left, but Finn still often habitually used the word “we” to refer to himself. However, the fact that neither sadness nor regret was reflected in his awkward smile meant that the Cavalry and Kishiar were sufficient to fill each other’s voids as siblings.

That fact was somewhat comforting.

“So is it time to start the historic first mission of the Cavalry’s Secret Information Team? I’m totally excited! See you later, Yuder!”

Yuder silently watched Finn Eldore’s departing figure before turning away. It was now time for him to make a brief outing as well.

…

“What’s going on? I didn’t call for you, why are you here so early?”

“I wanted to have a brief chat with you.”

Enon opened the door to his lodgings with a scowl and stared at Yuder’s face before snapping at him.

“Hmm. It seems something must have made you rather impatient?”

“…”

As usual, Enon had an uncannily sharp sense of intuition, different from Kishiar's. As Yuder said nothing, Enon let out a snort and opened the door a little wider, allowing him to enter.

"Come in for now. I don't have much time, so speak quickly."

The inside of the lodging looked somewhat different from the last time he had been there. Suspicious-looking magic tools and piles of paper were scattered everywhere, and pens rolled about in place of forks amid half-eaten food dishes.

Mick and Hellem were seated across from each other, talking over the cage of Pethuamet, completely engrossed in conversation and scribbling on paper without noticing their visitor.

"What are you looking at? Ignore them and come up here. You said you came to talk to me."

Enon's voice raised from the top of the stairs as Yuder observed them. Yuder turned his gaze and followed Enon into a small bedroom. The piles of dried herbs on the table beside the bed gave a true sense of Enon's dwelling place.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"I want to know how far the research has progressed. And… what's best for recovery when a mage has overused their power and become exhausted?"

"…Why are you suddenly asking about that when you're not a mage?"

Enon asked after a moment of silence. Yuder was surprised to see such an agitated expression on a face that usually remained unchanging even when biting into a raw lemon.

"I know people who can use magic even though I'm not a mage."

“What I mean is… No, forget it. Don’t speak. Don’t open your mouth! Enough!”

Enon suddenly yelled in anger, interrupting himself, and sat down a few steps away from Yuder.

“The research is progressing better than I thought. They know a lot of methods I hadn’t thought of, so it’s been a significant help. I’ve gained quite a bit of knowledge this time, especially from the mage named Hellem.”

Even though Enon had lived for a long time, his knowledge didn’t extend to every area. Watching Hellem and Mick researching the monster, he seemed to be quite impressed, even softening his previously furrowed expression.

“Anyway, right now, we’re extracting the monster’s fluid for investigation, and simultaneously feeding it pieces of magic stone to observe the absorption and excretion process. The latter is almost completed.”

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Chapter 394

The speed was unexpectedly tremendous. It wasn't a futile act that Kishiar had merely waited patiently for their arrival.

In Yuder's previous life, Yuder had been dispatched to deal with notorious, various monsters that were difficult to handle. Yet, knowing how to kill them didn't mean that Yuder knew how to study them.

'I was a little skeptical when attaching the title of an expert, but it seems reasonable.'

"The peculiarity I learned while repeatedly observing the monster eating and digesting is that digestion doesn't occur automatically at the same time as consumption."

Yuder turned his head at the surprising words that came while inwardly admiring them.

"Not digesting automatically? How does it eat all day without its body bursting?"

"For you, being a human, it might seem strange, but I can understand."

The non-human Enon calmly replied and continued,

"It eats all day because it needs magic to live. But when supplied with a steadily consistent piece of magic stone imbued with sufficient magic, I discovered that it doesn't proceed with immediate digestion and absorption as before."

The small Pethuamet usually digested almost simultaneously as it absorbed the faint magic found in the vegetables or grass it was

fed. However, when continuously fed with small fragments of magic stones filled with abundant magic, even the size of a fingernail, it began to show a different aspect.

“The movements of the hidden poison sac beneath its belly stir and move when absorbing the magic that has entered its stomach. It doesn’t move when not digesting. Mick discovered it.”

Based on those movements, the three continued their research, and they became confident that Pethuamet could freely control its digestion and magic absorption.

“Then …”

“Yes. What I’m investigating with its body fluid now is related to that. As I thought before, it seems possible to activate the toxicity you absorbed.”

The positive signal brightened the mood. Enon clicked his tongue, seeing the light in Yuder’s eyes.

“You’re that happy? Previously, you were not even worried about your power not coming back.”

“My thoughts have changed now.”

There was now a solid reason to recover quickly. Most of the reason was because of Kishiar, but Yuder didn’t go that far in saying it.

“So, how will you activate the toxicity? When will you start?”

“We’ll begin after ensuring it’s as safe as possible… Even if we’re quick, it will take a few more days.”

“That’s too late.”

“Why? There was no deadline to finish everything, right?”

Yuder opened their mouth slightly, looking at Enon's moody side profile.

"You must have heard, but soon there will be a charity party and secret auction under the intention of Baron Willhem and Duke Tain. I don't want to be in this condition by then. I must fully recover by that time."

"I heard it's going to happen… You, what are you going to do there? What has the Commander asked you to do? Or, are you just involved?"

Why had the spark suddenly flown toward Kishiar? Yuder frowned and replied,

"What to do? As a Cavalry member, I will be participating in some way, and if I think my strength is needed, I must step forward, but I can't in this state."

"You're not getting anxious because you think something will happen there?"

Only then did Yuder understand what Enon was saying. It seemed he was suspicious that Yuder was going to repeat the same act as before, confronting the gigantic Pethuamet alone, just like in a previous life.

"This time, it's not like that."

Enon gazed into Yuder's eyes, penetrating the truth and falsehood. After staring intently for a long time, he finally seemed to realize that Yuder's words were not lies. His facial muscles twitched with an irritated expression as he looked back.

"You should have something I can believe in."

"…"

“But it’s dangerous to proceed more quickly here. We need to repeat the verification process several times to grasp the possibilities and variables to some extent….”

“As long as there is the possibility of recovery, the danger doesn’t matter.”

“…You might not care, but I do. Did you hear what I just said?”

His cheeks were grabbed and, with a rare shout of anger, stretched out. He looked ridiculous, but Yuder did not give up making eye contact with Enon.

“I must get better. Help me just this once, Enon.”

“…”

The strength drained from Enon’s hand pinching his cheek tightly. Late to realize that his grip had loosened, he glared at his innocent fingers like they were the culprit, sighed deeply twice, and sat back down.

“How did I end up meeting such a guy?”

He grumbled, then pulled something out from a pile of medicinal herbs. It looked like black medicine that was in the process of drying.

“What’s this?”

“A test sample of a medicine I’m making from monster poison.”

The long explanation that followed could be summarized as a potion made by processing the toxic fluid of young Pethuamet, neutralizing it with various medicines, and employing magic power. Enon explained that in terms of composition, it yielded the best results, but research wasn’t complete as they hadn’t yet confirmed the risks when applied to humans.

“I was going to improve it until I was certain that you wouldn’t die from it, then give it to you.”

“…So then…”

Enon sharply slapped away the hand that Yuder promptly reached out.

“Listen to the story first.”

Yuder sat upright, hands on his knees, so as not to provoke him further. Still frowning, Enon’s eyebrows twitched as he opened his lips to continue speaking.

“Based on current predictions, if you take this, the poison in the medicine will react with the poison in your body, breaking the current balance of power within you. There will be substantial pain, but magic herbs will alleviate some of it. Meanwhile, you need to activate the power of absorption to completely digest or expel the remaining poison.”

“Can I immediately use the power of absorption?”

“If you have a strong will to overcome the pain.”

Enon responded calmly.

“Power is a tool led by the will of the user. The simpler and purer the will, the more powerfully it is exerted. And you’ve already wielded a power similar to a ‘medium,’ so that experience will help. In fact, I trust that in making this medicine.”

While listening to Enon’s words that it would be possible if he didn’t forget, Yuder repeatedly recalled a new yet familiar word.

‘Will… huh.’

“I’ll try to improve it as much as possible until the auction, but I’ll give you only one in case it’s not completed by then. Eat it after careful consideration only if you feel like you’ll die if you don’t use your power.”

“…I understand. Thank you, Enon.”

“When you thank me, I don’t feel happy at all.”

Enon replied with a grimace, reluctantly dropping a pill into Yuder’s hand with a truly reluctant face. Then he rummaged through his bag and threw a bottle filled with small white pills.

“And take this as well. You said it was stifling when you used your power, so these should help alleviate that.”

“This is too much.”

“Quiet, and take ten after each meal, morning, noon, and night. You need to lay the groundwork in preparation for when you take that poison medicine later on.”

There was no room to argue when the pharmacist said so. Yuder silently tucked the bottle away, and Enon finally relaxed his eyes.

“And you said earlier that you wanted to know something? About a good recovery method when a mage is exhausted? Just get a good night’s sleep and eat well. That’s it.”

Staring blankly at the too nonchalant answer, Enon crossed his arms, as if to say, what do you want from me?

“Why are you looking at me like that? Forcefully replenishing depleted magic energy is actually worse for the body. If you’re in a situation where you’ve used up so much power that it’s dangerous, you need to seek a priest, not a potion.”

“…Alright, I understand.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s it?”

What more reaction did he expect after hearing all the answers? Enon, whose lips had subtly twitched as though he wanted to say something, exhaled a long breath and replied, “No, never mind.” He then pulled something else from his bag and roughly threw it at Yuder. Catching it, Yuder saw that it was a small potion.

“Take it.”

“What’s this?”

“It’s just a vitality recovery potion! If you don’t want it, give it back.”

Yuder slipped the potion into his pocket before Enon’s hand could reach for it. Though rough and gruff, Enon couldn’t hide his generous nature, and that part was so like him that Yuder let out a faint smile.

“I’ll take it. Thank you.”

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Enon, having vigorously rubbed his hair, seemed to regret his actions for a moment but ultimately said nothing. Yuder, to resolve his awkwardness, informed him about what he had speculated - that the 4th-floor dungeon of the security management team was indeed hidden under the protection of blood, and about the newly discovered magic ore vein in the Great Sarain Forest. Fortunately, when the story was over, Enon was in a state where he had completely forgotten his previous awkwardness.

“A magic ore vein, huh… We must definitely investigate that.”

“I plan to do so. If we delve into it, we might find evidence to tell us who might have carefully infused magic there.”

“What about ‘before’? Isn’t there anything that could help?”

Yuder shook his head. In his previous life, there was neither information to offer nor areas he could speculate about those things he hadn’t known. Enon looked at Yuder with eyes lost in thought and suddenly mumbled,

“You act like you know everything, but there’s a lot you don’t know too.”

“If I knew everything, I wouldn’t be asking you questions all the time.”

“Yeah… I suppose that’s true.”

Enon’s eyes darkened as he responded.

“But why would you…”

“Assistant, Pharmacist, we’re going to eat lunch. If you want to join, come down.”

At that moment, Mick’s voice was heard from behind the door. Yuder reflexively stood up and looked back at Enon.

“What were you going to say?”

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

Enon also stood up, shaking his head. He looked irritated, as if he could see Mick beyond the door.

“That Mick Shuden guy. I know he’s knowledgeable and exceptional, but he often looks at me in a strange way, and it bothers me. I don’t like it.”

“…Looks at you?”

“Yes. I should know what his intention is to respond, but he doesn’t say anything and just stares. That’s even worse.”

Yuder had an idea about the intention. It was clearly related to Mick Shuden’s peculiar ability.

“He’s an Awakener. I heard he has the ability to see the essence. He might have seen something in you, so be careful.”

“The ability to see the essence? Do you mean the soul?”

“Not quite, but something similar. He can even see it in inanimate objects,” Yuder explained. Enon cursed that there were all sorts of abilities in the world.

“So, it’s only natural that he pays attention to me. It’s annoying that a guy with such an ability would come here, of all places.”

“Will you be okay?”

“What’s not going to be okay?”

Enon grumbled but his response was surprisingly tidy.

“As long as he doesn’t talk about what he sees in me, I can pretend not to know. It will be annoying, but now that I know the reason, it’s fine.”

It was a relief, but Enon didn’t seem to be even slightly curious about what the other person saw in him.

‘But then again, unless you are in a situation like mine, where you know very little about yourself, there might be no reason to be curious.’

“Are you going to have lunch?”

“No, I’ll head back right away.”

Yuder immediately shook his head in response to Enon’s question. Asking if he was going to have a meal even when he said he had no time was so like Enon.

“Oh, are you leaving already?”

When they descended to the lower floor, Mick, who was preparing the meal in the kitchen, widened his eyes and spoke.

“I appreciate the invitation, but I only came for a short visit, so I have to return soon.”

“I see. It’s a shame, but we’re busy today too, so it can’t be helped. Next time, let’s have a real drink and talk.”

Yuder walked to the door, followed by Enon, who maintained silence without offering a greeting or stepping inside as though he had something to say. Sensing this, Yuder didn’t hurry him and instead stood quietly, waiting for him to speak.

“I’ve been revisiting memories that have long been submerged, and I think there might be something related to you in there,” Enon said after a long pause. His words were vague enough to be free of suspicion to anyone overhearing, yet not so unclear as to be meaningless.

“Let’s talk after this is over. There are some things I want to hear about.”

“Okay.”

“And you…”

Enon trailed off, seeming to consider his words for a considerable time before finally opening his mouth.

“Is it true that those who have manifested a second gender as Awakeners are only attracted to the opposite gender?”

“Why are you asking that all of a sudden?”

“Is it right or wrong, anyway?”

“I think it’s generally true.”

“I see…”

Enon, with a very complicated expression on his face, soon turned around, saying, “That’s it.”

“Take good care of what I gave you. Don’t forget what I told you from above.”

Yuder wondered what Enon had held back from saying but merely nodded slightly and turned away.

…

“Did your meeting with the pharmacist go well today?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve heard that the research is progressing better than expected. Hellem was astonished that someone like Enon was working in a pharmacy in the capital. It’s unbelievable.”

In the blink of an eye, a day had passed, and it was night. Yuder, once again cloaked, followed Kishiar with Nathan, engaging in conversation.

“I haven’t seen him admire someone like that in a long time.”

“So it seems.”

“When we get back, I think I’ll have to give him a sincere gift plus several times his salary.”

Yuder said nothing, uncertain whether Enon would appreciate it.

Returning the way they had come was not difficult. The protective magic of the Red Deer Consortium’s underground storeroom, mended by Nathan Zuckerman the night before, no longer had the power to detain the intruders. Thanks to this, Kishiar could easily manipulate the deer-antler device to open the passage’s door.

“According to reports, the southern merchants staying at the inn didn’t move all day and only went out in the evening. Seeing that Baron Willhem has timely ordered his office closed to everyone, he probably intends to contact them somehow.”

And their absence provided a golden opportunity.

Upon receiving a report about Baron Willhem’s strange behavior, Kishiar immediately sent a reply to Pruelle, directing him toward the security management team. While they were breaking into a secret

storeroom, Ever, waiting at the security management team, was to coordinate with Pruelle to ensure access to the underground dungeon's fourth floor.

'And if we finish quickly, we'll join them.'

Reiterating the day's tasks, Yuder summoned small flames as he opened the door leading to the secret warehouse.

The vast storehouse filled with goods looked no different from the previous night. Even though he'd heard the southern merchants were gone, the sensation of someone possibly hiding sharpened his senses. Nathan Zuckerman also seemed to feel a similar tension, a glimpse of anxiety visible over his usually stoic face.

"Well, shall we begin?"

The only one who wasn't tense among them was Kishiar. The man, with a leisurely smile, approached the place filled with magic tools and selected a few.

"A 'duplication' magic tool that can create a fake through magic for a certain period. And the 'camouflage' tool that will make the fake seem real. Adding 'protection' and 'tracking' to that… all of them are of the highest quality."

Having picked the tools he needed, all that was left was to take the items in this space. Yuder observed Nathan Zuckerman disappearing without looking back, then stood in front of Kishiar, who was examining the magic tools.

"Commander, for a moment…"

"Hmm?"

"I'd like you to take this."

Handing over the potion that Yuder had brought all the way here, Kishiar's vividly shining red eyes blinked in puzzlement, even in the darkness.

"What's this?"

"I received it from Enon. It's a good medicine for recovery if you exhaust your magic power."

Perhaps because it was an unexpected item, Kishiar was silent for a while. The large man, gazing down at the small vial in his huge hand, finally spoke.

"You went not to inquire about research progress, but to receive this?"

"It was for both reasons…"

"I see. I'll use it well."

The man, slowly clutching the vial, put it in his pocket and looked up. Yuder had thought him overly composed, but the moment he faced that visage shimmering under the flickering light, his thoughts changed.

The joy and fiery redness spreading around Kishiar's eyes were as brilliant as a light that couldn't be described by anything else.

"Thank you for thinking of me."

"It's nothing."

Suddenly, a strange feeling made it hard for Yuder to breathe, and he quickly turned away. His heart pounded relentlessly.

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As befitting someone who had owned and used countless magic tools, Kishiar's movements were fluid and without hesitation. While he tirelessly used the magic tools and recharged them with magic stones, Nathan and Yuder ran about, ensuring that his work never paused for even a moment.

Yuder deliberately avoided stepping anywhere near the magic stones. Yuder did not want to encounter the red magic stone that was tied to his previous life again. After successfully duplicating and disguising items as varied as old, worn-out paintings, unverified small collectibles, and finally objects too large to carry easily, the three took a moment to sit on the ground and rest.

"You take care of these storage magic tools, Nathan. And don't forget to compile the list of items."

"Yes, understood."

In the sack before Kishiar were many illegally smuggled items contained within storage magic tools. As they were sealed using magic tools imbued with magic for weight reduction and appearance disguise, they looked no different from ordinary sacks of grain.

Yuder, noticing the sweat on Kishiar's forehead, cautiously asked, "Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I'm feeling great and invigorated."

Kishiar's eyes, looking down at the sack, seemed incredibly delighted and energetic.

"The duplicated items in this warehouse can't be recognized by just any high-level mage. I've also applied tracking magic tools, so

we can use them to trace those who buy these at the auction.”

Kishiar picked up a magic tool shaped like a hand mirror and chuckled. This magic tool was used for tracking valuable items if they were stolen.

“Now, let’s go handle the remaining Calanesa.”

After a sufficient rest, Kishiar was the first to rise. Yuder followed him, carrying the sacks that Nathan Zuckerman had brought all the way here.

The drugs, which looked dangerous enough to send chills down one’s spine, were, as before, packed in raggedy sacks and piled up in one place.

Compared to the precious magic tools and magic stones, these few sacks of Calanesa would bring more money to Duke Tain. The white powders, piled up like trash, felt even more horrifying to Yuder.

“Now, shall we make the switch?”

Yuder set down the sacks he and Nathan Zuckerman had brought. Kishiar had not been idle while Yuder was meeting with Enon. Inside the sacks were several storage magic tools called ‘Bottles of Infinity.’

‘They’re called infinite only in name; they’re not much different from other storage tools… But they can preserve liquids and foods for a long time.’

Magic tools are hard to obtain suddenly, even with money. The fact that Kishiar had obtained so many, and so quickly, likely meant that he had taken them from his personal collection.

As Yuder was about to open the Bottles of Infinity together with Nathan while Kishiar was preparing, he found the tightly sealed caps

harder to open than expected.

“Open it carefully. It’s not a bottle that opens with force; you need a knack for it. Don’t break it; give it to me.”

Nathan, frowning at the sight, took the bottle from Yuder’s hand with a brusque voice, showing him how to open it properly.

“If the contents touch your hand…”

“Is it dangerous?”

“No. It’s white powder, so it doesn’t wipe off easily and leaves traces. Just be careful.”

The southern man quietly replied.

“You don’t need to worry about that. Just wash it off with water and wind, and erase the traces.”

“If you use your abilities too much… No, never mind.”

“It’s fine to use them little by little, as long as it’s not excessive.”

Yuder guessed roughly what Nathan Zuckerman was about to say and preemptively answered him.

“…”

Nathan Zuckerman looked at Yuder with an inscrutable expression for a moment but soon began to silently continue opening the bottle caps.

“Please be careful this time.”

Yuder said no more and repeated the same task by his side.

“Have all the bottles been opened?”

In the meantime, Kishiar, who had easily pulled down and arranged all the bags filled with Calanesa powder, came over to check the progress of the work.

“What’s in this bottle is ground grain mixed with Alos grass. It looks no different from Calanesa to the naked eye, but unlike actual Calanesa, it has no hallucinogenic effects or addictiveness and is good for insomnia.”

Kishiar picked up a bottle and smiled.

“And there’s one more effect. Can you guess what it is?”

Kishiar was smiling as if he somehow knew Yuder already knew the answer.

‘Alos grass, huh… It’s used for insomnia, but isn’t it also usually used to bury food waste?’

Nobles might not know since they don’t throw away garbage themselves, but commoners used Alos grass more as a good odor remover and an aid in quickly decomposing garbage. There were other plants good for insomnia, but none were as good for obtaining fertilizer without a rotten smell.

“Was it not merely a simple switch you were trying to make?”

“Unlike other goods, switching everything might cause a headache. But I just remembered that the plant that becomes Calanesa is very susceptible to decay. Unlike Ponesa, it loses all its original effects once it rots.”

It was a pity. Looking at Kishiar’s smiling face, Yuder felt a refreshing sensation running down his spine.

‘I see. They probably made it this way to minimize the chance of decay, but if you mix in ground Alos grass, even that can be nullified.’

The efficacy of Alos grass was that strong. However, it wasn't knowledge that a noble-born Duke should know.

Although Yuder now knew that Kishiar didn't grow up as privileged as he seemed, it was still surprising to see him casually speaking of knowledge that nobles wouldn't know, without showing any signs of hardship.

Yuder watched Kishiar switching the Calanesa powder in the bags. After scooping out half of the Calanesa powder, the Bottle of Infinity was tilted into the bag, and white powder flowed endlessly out of what seemed to be an empty bottle, filling it completely. Nathan and Yuder also tilted their bottles to fill their assigned bags with powder.

Kishiar took only a handful of the collected drug powder and put it in a pocket pulled from his bosom. The remaining powder was transferred to the Bottles of Infinity, and with an impassive look, he nodded to Nathan Zuckerman.

"I will dispose of it as I leave."

"Yes."

Now the warehouse had returned to looking exactly as it had when they first entered. Only the fact that it was filled with fakes was something that the three people present, or perhaps an exceptionally skilled mage, would have known.

'We did it.'

Reflecting on items that, in his previous life, would have been easily sold off without anyone knowing, he experienced a peculiar sensation that slowly spread from his fingertips to his toes. At the very end of it, Kishiar was there, as always.

The three of them were not in the cleanest of states, having handled and tended to old objects. The same was true for Kishiar, who had touched many items. With dust-smeared cheeks, a sweaty forehead, and wearing a cloak that reeked of stale mold, he hardly looked like the well-known Duke of Peletta.

But despite that, somehow, he looked even more like himself. Would it have been strange if it had seemed that way?

"…So now…"

Kishiar, unlike Yuder, began to speak with no hint of pride in what he had accomplished, only meticulously scanning the surroundings with a gaze that seemed to be conducting a final check. He then halted abruptly, shifting his gaze somewhere else. Yuder and Nathan Zuckerman did the same.

In the blink of an eye, a sharp, alert sense informed them that a powerful mass of energy was rapidly approaching from somewhere.

'What is this…!'

Yuder extinguished the dim flame that had been illuminating the area, and the faint sound of Nathan Zuckerman drawing his sword reached their ears. All three moved swiftly, instinctively reacting to their senses. Yuder flung himself behind a shelf that was suitable for hiding.

Following that, a deafening noise, accompanied by an explosion, resounded not far from them. It was not from the direction they had entered. It was the opposite.

'Has the door leading to the tavern been blown open…!'

Yuder, relying on long experience, slowed his breathing to an almost inaudible level.

Soon, unfamiliar sounds and footsteps began to echo.

“…They said a rat had gotten in, but there’s no one here?”

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The first thing I heard was the voice of an old man. His voice, coarse and mixed with phlegm, accused those who had come with him in a thick western accent.

“It’s just the same as when we checked last night. I knew we shouldn’t have trusted you folks and broken down a perfectly good door. What will the Baron say when he learns of this?”

“…A force definitely moved here.”

The next voice that was heard was very low and slow, contrasting with the voice of the old man previously. Yuder quickly turned his head to glimpse between the shelves filled with counterfeit magic tools and catch sight of his opponents.

Beyond the shattered entrance, the shadows of three people were reflected in the flickering lamplight. The one holding the lantern was a hunched old man, and the other two were tall and well-built, their skin red where it peeked out from the heavy clothing that wrapped them as tightly as midwinter.

‘The tavern owner and the southern merchants I saw before…’

Yuder had heard that the southern merchants were gone to meet Baron Willhem, but he hadn’t expected them to return so quickly. Moreover, from the conversation, it seemed that they had accurately identified the movement of some force here for some unknown reason.

A sense of tension caused strength to surge through Yuder’s body. He looked around to locate Kishiar but could not find him within his line of sight. The same was true for Nathan Zuckerman.

Even though it was obvious and wise to hide separately to avoid the enemy's gaze, that fact felt terribly anxious at this moment.

'Damn it.'

Yuder bit his lower lip and clenched his fist tightly.

"There's nothing more to see here. Get out. Don't touch anything here until the time comes, even if it's you. I have to go out and make sure no one comes near this place!"

In the meantime, the old man began to push the southern merchants out, annoyed. He openly grumbled, visibly angry at the fact that the southern men had carelessly broken the secret door to the basement when nothing was wrong.

It would have been nice if they had simply left, but the southern merchants did not comply.

"We cannot leave. We need to check for intruders."

"Oh, there's nobody here! If anyone had come in here, I would have known!"

"There are not only this passage, aren't there?"

"The other side is guarded by the Baron's knights. Not even a bug can get in."

"We don't know that. If evidence of an intruder is found later, we will present your head to the Duke first."

"What… what? What did you just say…?"

A brief phrase in an incomprehensible southern language followed, and then one of the southern merchants bowed his head and began forcibly dragging the old man out.

“What, what are you doing? Why are you grabbing me!”

The terrified shout of what are you doing turned into a stifled moan. As those sounds gradually receded, the remaining southern merchant walked into the secret warehouse with heavy footsteps.

A long shadow spread inside the warehouse, and the air seemed to chill for a moment.

‘…A gaze I’ve felt before.’

Though his face was almost hidden by the hat pulled low, sharp eyes like his were rare. He was undoubtedly the man who had turned his head when he felt Yuder’s gaze at the tavern.

The man walked a certain distance inside, then stopped and looked around. A moment later, a resonant voice in the Imperial language came through.

“Intruder, I already know you’re here. Come out.”

The warehouse remained as silent as death. The man who had maintained his silence, waiting for a response, spoke once more.

“I’ve confirmed with my comrade that a great power is moving here in the city of Tainu. It must be you who have infiltrated various parts and caused explosions. If you come out now, I won’t kill you.”

For a moment, Yuder’s eyebrows twitched in surprise.

‘He must think we’re from the Star of Nagran.’

“I am an Awakener, just like you. I have the power to kill you instantly if you try to escape. This is your last warning. Come out.”

The Southern merchant spoke calmly, revealing that he too was an Awakener. It seemed that this fact was the source of his self-assured confidence in coming alone.

But knowing that he was an Awakener, Yuder regained his composure.

‘I should probably thank him for revealing he’s an Awakener from the start. I knew something was off when I first saw him.’

It’s always easier to face a strong monster whose name you know, rather than an unknown one. Whether the opponent possessed a certain lineage of power or not, being an Awakener surely meant there was some way to deal with him based on past experience.

‘And since he’s already mistaken us, I should take full advantage of that.’

“I will give you one last chance to choose. I’ll count to three. One…”

Yuder quickly thought, listening to the low voice coming from not too far away. Although he didn’t know where Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman were, they were probably all thinking the same thing: quickly deal with the Southern merchant and escape. There were three of them and only one opponent, so they had plenty of power to spare.

‘And first and foremost, it’s my job to handle him.’

Kishiar had already expended much energy today and was an important person who must not be discovered, while Nathan Zuckerman had a pile of magic tools that had to be safely taken out. Yuder was the only one free and with no reason to escape first.

‘So first, I need to deal with the distractions.’

Yuder pulled his cloak’s hood deeper and rummaged inside his garment, quickly finding the recovery potion given by Enon.

Enon would probably scoff at the situation, but Yuder couldn't complain. Who would have thought he'd need to recover so quickly?

"Two… Three…!"

Yuder roughly threw the potion into his mouth, swallowing it as he sprang up.

'Wind, and earth!'

As he used both elements at once, the surrounding shelves shook, and the duplicated fake items swirled in the wind, becoming a tangled mess. The sounds of shattering and breaking echoed like a scream from thousands.

Yuder, unable to overcome the shaking force, dodged a collapsing shelf and looked around. It was hard to tell what was what in the darkness, but he needed to find Kishiar quickly.

'I'm sure I saw him move this way…!'

At that moment, an unseen attack from the darkness aimed at Yuder's neck. He swiftly stepped on the wind and dodged to the side, just as the objects where he had stood exploded from the force of the Southern merchant's attack.

'Was it a wind-attribute attack? Or something like sword energy?'

Either way, a slight delay in dodging would have spelled disaster. Rolling to hide behind a relatively intact shelf, Yuder caught his breath, only to feel a sharp, stabbing pain below his abdomen.

'….'

Yuder clenched his teeth in silence, gripping the shelf and crouching down.

‘…He said it would hurt quite a bit, but it wasn’t just an empty threat.’

It was clear that the effect of the elixir Enon had warned him about had begun. The pain, which usually began inside the navel where an Awakener’s power was concentrated, near the Mana Hole, rapidly transformed into a burning agony that spread to his heart, both arms, and legs. Among those, the most intense pain emanated from his left eye, as if something were branding it with fire in the unseen darkness.

Suppressing the urge to breathe too deeply due to the pain, Yuder rose again. Indescribable pain made his body tremble, but unlike before, he no longer felt suffocated in his chest whenever he exerted force. It felt as if everything that had been pent up inside him was finally touching the flames that would consume them, burning fiercely.

In the darkness, there was a sound like weapons clashing, as if someone were dealing with a Southern merchant. Kishiar had not brought his new sword today, so it must have been Nathan Zuckerman. The wind was still following Yuder’s will, wreaking havoc all around.

‘Kishiar.’

It was important to deal with the Southern merchant, but he needed to find Kishiar first and send him toward the passage.

‘Where is Kishiar…?’

In that brief and simple desperation, the only thought left in the darkness.

Suddenly, amidst the eye-searing pain, Yuder ‘saw’ something.

A thin energy extending from his body.

That fragile and incomprehensible something, like a thread, was pointing somewhere. Instinctively, he realized that Kishiar was at the other end, even though no one had explained it to him.

Without a second thought, Yuder kicked the ground and ran.

And roughly grabbed the hand of the man who was twinkling alone like a light in the darkness.

“Commander…!”

Kishiar turned his head, as if he had been searching for something in the dark basement, breathing heavily. He could see that Kishiar’s face had been altered with magic, but it did not feel strange. The quickly approaching hand had touched Yuder’s cheek to confirm his presence before he could refuse.

The wind, following the turbulent emotions, swirled objects into a vortex, blocking the Southern merchant’s path, and toppled a shelf.

“The exit is this way. Please go ahead!”

“Why is your body so hot? Didn’t they say you shouldn’t exert yourself too much?”

“I’m fine. The priority now is to secure the safety of the Commander and Zuckerman…”

At that moment, another attack came. Although he sensed it and guessed the direction, the attack was merely rough and blind, perhaps because controlling it was not easy due to the interfering wind. As Yuder was about to turn his body to exert force, Kishiar embraced him and reached out like lightning. A massive invisible power erupted from his hand, and the incoming attack was repelled as if it had hit a wall. Another shelf crashed loudly.

“…I have no intention of going ahead.”

A small whisper, mixed with the wind, flowed into Yuder’s ears.

“If we go, we go together.”

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Chapter 398

Had Yuder been as Yuder once was, Yuder would have refuted that statement. There were countless things that could have been said here.

Most important priorities.

Things that needed to be done.

And even the condition of Kishiar's body.

But Yuder, in the end, couldn't say a word. The powerful force, more potent than ever, that was felt from the hand embracing Yuder's back, and the emotion that emanated from it, blocked Yuder's mouth.

It was the same level of desperation as when Yuder had been wandering in the darkness, looking for Kishiar…

"…"

For a moment, forgetting even the pain, Yuder's fiercely pounding heart shivered with an intense agony as if being slashed by a knife once more. Yuder bit his lips hard enough to draw blood, suppressing the involuntary nausea that surged with the heat and pain that crawled up the skin. Cold sweat dripped down Yuder's back, but it snapped him back to awareness.

'This is not the time to lose consciousness.'

Trying to convince Kishiar would be useless; Yuder wouldn't change his mind. Therefore, Yuder had to prioritize sending Nathan Zuckerman first, then plan to escape together later.

“I understand. Then I’ll send Zuckerman first, so please let go for now.”

“The one who needs to go first is you. How can you be fine after using so much strength?”

“I took a medicine from Enon to prepare for this situation, so don’t worry.”

“Medicine?”

“I’ll report that part to you later.”

Yuder did not explain further and stepped back.

“The enemy is very capable of sensing our presence, and can even create concentrated energy and send it flying without weapons. It seems that he thinks of us as the Star of Nagran, so I’ll move without conflicting with him. Therefore, Commander, you should also…”

“Deal with it with only the power of the Awakener.”

A man who had quickly interpreted what Yuder was trying to say gave the desired response.

“Can you lure the enemy to the right end of the shelf where there are many stone statues as soon as Zuckerman gets out of the way?”

“Planning to knock it down?”

“Yes.”

Kishiar tightly closed his lips, his face lost in thought for a brief moment.

“That’s not a bad idea… but I’ll push them towards the place where the Callanesa powder is instead, and when the enemy gets

close, pour the water as soon as I signal. Then head for the exit together, knocking down the shelves to block the way.”

Would a charging enemy even care about Callanesa powder?

But something in Kishiar’s expression conveyed certainty, and Yuder unknowingly nodded.

“Understood.”

“Then stop using the wind for now.”

Yuder obeyed his command and calmed the wind.

Even after stopping the use of power, the inner corner of Yuder’s left eye grew hotter as time passed. It felt like it would burst at any moment. The energy swirling inside Yuder’s body was painful enough just standing still, but the more strength Yuder exerted, the more the inner heat rose, feeling like burning alive.

It was a pain both similar and different from when manifesting the second gender.

‘Still… thanks to that, my senses seem even sharper.’

As the chilling pain surged, Yuder’s senses sharpened proportionally. The strange thread-like energy that Yuder had seen after finding Kishiar had disappeared, but the senses, honed to the limit like a knife freshly sharpened, had not dulled at all.

Yuder could accurately perceive the diminishing wind in the darkness and the direction of the collapsing shelf due to its aftermath. The shapes and numbers of the objects tumbling on the floor, the places where the enemy and ally stood, and even the path that needed to be cleared to reach the exit - all were felt with astonishing clarity.

A disturbance was felt from the upper floor. Perhaps it was just thinking that the commotion coming from the lower floor was taking too long for a comrade's act.

"I will go ahead. Watch your step and follow me."

Yuder quickly made his way through the disordered storeroom towards where Nathan Zuckerman and the southern merchant were engaged in battle. Amidst the collapsed shelves, where various objects rolled about like trash, the two men constantly clashed swords and force, repeating the sequence of meeting and parting. Each time their invisible, condensed power collided above the flashing, glowing swords, an immense recoil occurred, causing the sound of air bursting to resonate repeatedly. Their movements were so swift that they were difficult to grasp even with the eye.

Nathan Zuckerman wasn't using his sword's energy, perhaps to keep his identity hidden, but even so, Yuder was considerably surprised that he could handle the situation to that extent just with the condensed force of his sword.

'Is that person… truly a merchant?'

It was unbelievable that a mere merchant could have the skill to compete with a swordmaster. Likely, that person was already an outstanding swordsman before becoming an Awakener.

'Who exactly is he?'

Yuder firmly resolved anew to discover the identity of the enemy, organizing the positive information he had gleaned from the two men's battle.

'If he was originally a swordsman and then became an Awakener, dealing with him would be somewhat easier.'

A sword is a tool utilized through a human's body. Too accustomed to it, the southern merchant, even after awakening the power to wield freely without human hands, only used it condensed like a sword or in a way similar to knights sending out aura, and used no other attacks.

That was evidence that he was still deeply ensnared by the original limits of a swordsman.

'He confines the power within the blind spots of his physical body. That's his limit.'

Having comprehended everything, Yuder moved the ground between Nathan Zuckerman and the southern merchant, deftly shaking beneath the enemy's feet. In an instant, due to the ground suddenly rising or shallowly sinking, the enemy lost balance, and the wind lightly conjured again swept up the fallen objects like a whirlwind, blocking the way. It was control only possible because of an extremely keen sense.

A bitter taste was felt in his mouth, as if his guts were shaken, but he restrained it, thinking of Kishiar.

Not missing the opportunity, Kishiar inserted himself in front of Nathan Zuckerman and pushed his shoulder, saying, "Go ahead."

The man carrying a bag with magic tools bound to his back turned his head. In Yuder's unusually bright vision, his face appeared messed up with all kinds of broken fragments and thin scratches from the aftermath of the force. The faithful knight hesitated for a moment but withdrew, taking a deep breath when Yuder lit a small flame in front.

"…"

No words were exchanged, but the brief glance exchanged was filled with concern.

Nathan Zuckerman’s back quickly receded with the guidance of the flame.

“Where are you going!”

The southern merchant, noticing Nathan Zuckerman dodging, condensed his energy and launched an attack again, but it was effortlessly deflected by Kishiar’s outstretched hand, losing its force and bouncing away.

‘Is it a combination of martial arts and repelling force?’

Knowing Kishiar’s ability, Yuder was able to understand immediately, but the southern man momentarily faltered, showing surprise. However, he didn’t retreat but instead turned more aggressive, charging at Kishiar.

However, unlike Nathan Zuckerman’s attacks, which were consistent in direction and force, Kishiar’s attacks were not something he could easily handle in the same manner he had been using thus far. Though they appeared to be inconsequential at a glance, the experience of his own projected force being reflected and unpredictably flying back multiple times caused the demeanor of the southern merchant to slowly change.

He began to mutter short words in the southern language and started to use more power than before. But this became his decisive downfall.

Kishiar pulled in the force emitted by his opponent, gathered it, and thrust it into the enemy’s chest as if it was his own power.

Swallowing a silent groan, the man’s body flew far and slammed into something. Yuder realized that the place was precisely where the stacks of Calanesa fodder were, and turned his head. Just then, Kishiar, who seemed to have been waiting, looked in Yuder’s direction and opened his mouth.

“Now!”

Yuder gathered all of his boiling, fiery pain. Even if the blazing agony were to burst his left eye, he was determined to accomplish this task.

As he released the power above his soaring hand, a stream of water created in midair began to grow. The amount was much more than what he usually summoned, and the pain reached its limit. Yuder spat out a clot of blood through his tightly clenched teeth.

“…Ugh.”

His hand trembled, and a sharp ringing sound filled his ears. But the power did not stop.

The swirling force within him finally gathered everything that remained inside Yuder, rising like a flame meeting a massive wind. Simultaneously,

The black stain that had long covered his left eye seemed to melt away, engulfed in a golden light as if burning.

‘Go…!’

Without knowing what had happened to his eye, he sent the stream of water, which spread like a wave in the air, flying towards the enemy like a shot arrow. The southern merchant, staggering to his feet, saw this and desperately moved his hands to exert his power, clearly attempting to block the stream.

And Kishiar, not missing this opportunity, quickly retreated and rushed toward Yuder.

Yuder saw his outstretched hand and reached out as well.

The moment their hands grasped and pulled each other, the sound of shelves collapsing one after the other, pulled down by the last force sent by Kishiar, rang out from behind them.

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Chapter 399

He ran forward, relying on the warmth of the hand he was holding.

As soon as he re-entered the passage they had come through, Yuder moved the earth without looking back. Darkness could no longer hold him back. With a loud noise, the solid stone walls and stairs crumbled and collapsed, blocking the passage. At the same time, hot blood explosively flowed from Yuder's nose once more, but he did not feel it.

Only after the echoing noise had subsided did the person holding Yuder's hand stop. He pulled on the hand, signaling to move forward, but Yuder did not follow. Turning his head, he saw a pale face hidden in the darkness, looking down at Yuder with an expression he had never seen before.

"…The blood."

With a groan-like whisper, Kishiar pushed Yuder's cloak back and took it off. Simultaneously, the revealed golden left eye caught his fingertips' attention, but until the hand reached his own eye, Yuder had not realized what had happened to it.

He realized the anomaly when he looked at his own face, reflected small in Kishiar's eyes.

'…What is that?'

The left eye, which had been filled with an unremovable black stain no matter what he had done, was no longer there. But what did the bright golden light emanating from within mean?

He doubted his eye, looking closer, but the light did not fade. The light flowing from within the pupil, as if someone had lit a lantern, was neither an illusion nor a delusion.

‘What on earth is this…?’

The brilliant light, as if gold had been melted, strangely resembled the magic possessed by Kishiar. It felt as if he were looking at Kishiar’s magic swirling and shining within the small window of the pupil.

More unusual than his blood-stained, messed-up face and clothes was that eye, and as he gazed blankly at it, Kishiar closed his eyes, and the only mirror Yuder could look into also disappeared.

Only then did Yuder calm his boiling excitement and look down at himself. Although his body was still tingling in pain, the intense pressure, which felt as if something would burst out just moments ago, had disappeared. Compared to before he expelled the water, it was no exaggeration to say that only remnants of the pain remained.

‘It literally feels like something burst… burst for sure.’

The disappearance of the stain that covered his eye was a good sign. He didn’t know exactly what was what, but it seemed that he had managed to control the poison’s strength that spread through his body in the chaos. The medicine created by Enon, based on the research of Hellem and Mick, had finally fulfilled its role faithfully.

His mind felt lighter after confirming success, but it felt quite difficult to figure out how to start explaining to the speechless Kishiar.

‘I didn’t realize I had lost so much blood… He must have been incredibly shocked. I must tell him first that it’s not as bad as it looks.’

“…Comm.”

Commander. He opened his mouth to call him that, but the blood still pooled in his mouth flowed thoughtlessly, causing his attempt to fizzle. As Yuder wiped his face roughly with his sleeve, the man, watching with a grim expression, exhaled deeply.

After a while, long fingers reached out and gently wiped away the blood smeared below his lips. Yuder realized a little late that the hand was much colder than usual.

“You don’t need to open your mouth now.”

An utterly composed and elegant voice that was low enough to send chills down the listener’s spine echoed in the darkness.

“Report back, and then we shall discuss.”

Kishiar never lost his calm, no matter the situation.

He treated crises as unexpected joys during a game, laughing off failure as nothing more than a silly joke, yet never losing sight of reality in blind rage. He knew how to plan rationally for a distant future.

But in this very moment,

Yuder saw an unmistakable deep scar hidden within the seemingly composed eyes of the man.

A soul-shaking, shocking sensation briefly swept over Yuder’s entire body, chilling him to the core. He hurriedly opened his mouth, desperate to explain.

“I’m fine. This blood is… not because of an injury……”

“I said we will discuss it later.”

A hand reached out and lifted him before he could blink. There was no opportunity to request to be put down.

“…”

Yuder heard the rapid heartbeat of the man who was urgently moving, holding him tight in the dark. Though the man’s face and voice hid his emotions, the pulse racing as though about to burst could not be concealed.

A sound so desperate and pressing that it pained Yuder into silence.

The moment Yuder heard that small and rapid sound, holes inside his body seemed to open all at once, twitching as though the pain was subsiding.

What could he say to that sound?

Taking medicine was an unquestionably right choice, but the quietly moaning holes brought a familiar yet new pain to Yuder Aile.

He somehow felt like he understood the sentence they had been silently screaming all along.

You will regret it.

You will regret it…

‘…Have I done something to regret again?’

Yuder squinted his eyes. A sharp pain throbbed in his head.

…

“What is this?”

Yuder roughly placed a piece of paper down before the smiling man. A mere glance would reveal what it was about, but the man feigned ignorance, jokingly.

“This is the thirteenth report about the unrest in Peletta.”

“Oh my, thirteen reports. His Majesty must be tired of checking them all.”

“You can’t claim to be unaware that these reports keep coming, more frequent and negative. Why did you expel the Imperial Knights staying in Peletta?”

“Do you know how much they’ve been eating at my castle without working since I returned to Peletta? Margaret was angry, saying she couldn’t feed them anymore. If I didn’t deal with it, I might not get my meal either.”

“Are you joking even now?”

“I’m serious… What response were you expecting? That I should rebel since we’ve shared a bed for a long time?”

Yuder was speechless at the man’s smug smile. He took a breath, calming his excitement before he could speak again.

“…Why don’t you deny it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You could deny that going to Peletta and passing on your position doesn’t mean you won’t acknowledge the Emperor. You can say you’ll reduce the scale of the Peletta Knights if they cause unrest, and you can explain the goods that were said to be heading to the castle if you want to.”

“They call me Commander once again.”

At the sound of the laughter-laden voice, his mouth automatically closed.

“It has been almost a year since you became Commander, yet you have not adapted to it? I hear the Emperor was quite impressed with the strength of the new Cavalry Commander.”

“…”

How could the words on his lips disappear so suddenly? But he felt too wronged to reply, so Yuder only gnawed at his lower lip. Kishiar, who was watching, picked up a piece of paper in front of him with a leisurely gesture.

“…This, too, is the same. To bring something that should never be taken out to the person in question. Do you still think of yourself as a member who can fix things if you mess up? If our new Emperor had known about this, he would never have let it go. Perhaps the beheading of a traitor would have been the responsibility of the new Cavalry Commander.”

“…I!”

Yuder knew it too, of course. Secretly stealing a report that went directly to the Emperor, especially one related to treason, was a grave crime. The man before him didn’t know how much contemplation had led to this action. Probably, he didn’t even want to know.

Although he knew that would be the case…

Yuder clenched his teeth and bowed his head as silent footsteps approached him. A hand in a white glove delicately folded the paper and handed it back to Yuder. The moment the cold touch of leather brushed against his fingertips, his shoulders shuddered. The paper didn’t make it into Yuder’s hand and fell limply, rolling around.

“…Yudrain.”

The man with golden hair whispered, looking at the paper.

“You’re fearless, and that’s the problem. But I won’t deny that it fascinates me.”

“…”

“But there’s a limit to what I can overlook out of mere interest. Even though you’re young, don’t you know what the priority is? Did you think that if I denied the rebellion, you’d simply believe me?”

Of course not.

His heart grew cold. A chill wind blew.

“I suppose I must go now.”

Kishiar, bending at the waist, picked up the fallen paper again. This time, he extended his fingers and handed it over personally, his movement gentle enough to feel oddly affectionate…

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Chapter 400

‘…Ah.’

Yuder suddenly realized that the disappearing figure of Kishiar was not reality. The conversation they had just shared was a thing of the long-forgotten past.

An old dream.

With that realization, both the familiar sight of the dressing room and the figure of Kishiar vanished, leaving Yuder alone in darkness.

Staring into the unending darkness, Yuder looked at his hand to find that only a piece of paper Kishiar had handed him still remained. The coldness and anger, the unidentified emotions that Yuder of the past had felt, welled up inside his chest like a mirage, only to fade away weakly.

‘Yes. Back then, I… I took this out and showed it to Kishiar.’

Unlike some forgotten memories, this was one of the conversations that remained relatively vivid in his mind. However, although the conversation itself remained impactful, the emotions and thoughts he had felt that day had dimmed and blurred with time, making some parts feel strangely unfamiliar.

The never-formally-accused treason suspicion against Duke Peletta.

But at the time, couriers had been busily going back and forth to the Sun Palace beneath the surface. The Emperor of Katchian had not revealed any particular reaction, but he indirectly showed his caution and warning by keeping an eye on Peletta.

Yuder threw the paper, unable to understand the man who entered the Commander's room over the wall with a calm face, whether he knew about it or not.

Had Duke Peletta Kishiar La Orr truly shut himself away in his estate with the intention of rebelling?

Were the ominous rumors secretly circulating the palace all true?

…Could he truly harbor the intent to rebel?

What Yuder probably wanted to confirm the most was the third question. In fact, when Yuder first heard the rumors about Kishiar's suspected rebellion, his immediate thought was, "What treason could there be from such a person?" Rebellion seemed ludicrous. The man was too frivolous, and everything about him seemed meaningless.

He had abandoned his handcrafted Cavalry without regret, shown no sadness at the death of his last blood relative. He escaped from Peletta because he had no gaming partners and jumped over the Cavalry's wall. Yuder could not fathom what he was living for.

Could someone who seemed to find no meaning in anything really harbor the intent to rebel? What would be the point?

The new Emperor had become the adoptive son of the previous Emperor through legal means, ascending to the throne after holding the position of Crown Prince. No one doubted that the previous Emperor had died of a natural disease. Although the situation was somewhat chaotic at the beginning of the new reign, many citizens welcomed the arrival of a young, energetic, and healthy Emperor. Even to the inexperienced eyes of the new Cavalry Commander, it was clear that the Emperor's position would soon become unassailable.

Yet, another thought crossed his mind.

If someone could so easily evade surveillance and rush to the Capital in an instant, wouldn’t it be entirely possible for him to hatch a plot out of the Emperor’s sight?

Was there truly nothing behind his strange and secretive facade?

Could the belief that he couldn’t possibly harbor the intent to rebel be a horribly wrong judgment, as Kishiar had put it, made because they had “shared a bed for so long”?

Despite having been intimate with the man for so long, Yuder had nothing he could be certain of. Therefore, he had to ask in order to find the answer.

And the answer that returned shattered every nameless fragment of emotion inside Yuder, summoning a bitterly cold winter.

After that time, Kishiar never sought out his room again. Yuder also bolted the window through which the man used to pass and never reopened it.

Having thought up to that point, Yuder let go of the paper he was holding. The piece of paper, lost in the darkness, vanished without a trace.

‘Perhaps then… I wanted to believe Kishiar.’

As time went on, looking back once again at that era, he saw something he hadn’t felt back then.

At that time, Yuder might have wanted to believe in Kishiar more than he thought he did. Could he really have not known the expectation and fear that shone brightly in the unweathered face?

The word ‘priority’ that Kishiar left behind at that time had a sufficient effect in stimulating the sense of responsibility that was still unfamiliarly resting on Yuder’s shoulders. Especially since it was a

turbulent time with protests related to the existence of the first Cavalry Commander of commoner origin and the treatment of the Awakeners.

Whether they liked it or not, the status of the Cavalry was undoubtedly closely related to the treatment of the Awakeners throughout the empire, and Yuder was the only one who could protect all of them. It was too difficult and heavy a task for someone who had lived alone without ever taking responsibility for anything, but after that time, he forgot the weight.

The anger and disappointment left by Kishiar La Orr made all of that possible.

He refused to admit it then, so he never even thought about it, but now he seemed to understand.

Yuder wanted to keep the Cavalry intact, so easily left behind by Kishiar La Orr.

From the moment he realized that he could no longer rely on anyone.

To stand on his own and move forward on his own.

Furiously.

‘But thinking about it now, that too is probably…’

Kishiar had returned the paper pulled out by Yuder twice. If he had wanted to use that fact, he could have easily taken advantage of Yuder at that time, but instead, he left something close to advice.

As a result, Yuder began to move with ‘priority’ in mind thereafter, as he mentioned, which was no different from following his words again.

Behind the old misunderstanding. Things that were hidden behind the unknown.

Yuder recalled the shadowed red eyes that had looked at him.

The deeply recessed, cold and gloomy eyelids, the lusterless, brittle ends of his hair, and the cheeks as pale as if the blood had stopped flowing. He had not found it strange because it was that man, but now that he knew the healthy version of him, nothing seemed normal.

‘First of all, the situation in which Kishiar was in was like that.’

He didn’t know it then, but now he knew the fact that the previous life’s Kishiar might have suffered significant damage to his vessel not long after he had created the Cavalry.

Even in such a state, when Yuder suffered injuries that almost cut off both his arms, he knew that the wound healed for reasons that could not be explained unless Kishiar secretly used divine power.

He now knew that he had expected enough to tacitly approve of Kishiar’s excuse of jumping the fence, using the tactical game he played with him as an excuse…

Did a real reason for Kishiar La Orr to rebel exist?

Were the things that he believed in then the truth?

Why hadn’t he denied or affirmed the question?

He wanted to know.

Like the sudden realization of an unknown hunger, Yuder became acutely aware that he desperately wanted to know the answer.

‘I want to know.’

Something that could not be understood by mere speculation.

The answer to something that had been lost, leaving countless empty holes within.

The secrets that Kishiar might have hidden from him, or perhaps had told him but were forgotten and might have vanished without him even knowing.

As he fiercely focused on this thought alone, a light suddenly burst forth from the darkness.

A familiar yet intense red energy obscured his vision, followed by a shimmering haze mixed with golden energy, enveloping it like a mist. The dreamlike and beautiful dance of light dazzled his eyes, and as they cleared once again, Yuder found himself standing once more in a dream of the past he had seen one day.

'…It's been a long time since this happened. I thought it was an illusion, but it's real; it's astonishing.'

A low voice that sounded incredibly elegant, though devoid of strength. Beyond the blurred view, he could see the face of a man sitting upright at a desk.

Gloved hands elegantly folded, and the interior of Peletta Castle he had seen just once.

It was Kishiar from that day.

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Chapter 401

Yuder’s chest roared to a boil in an instant.

It was a time slightly ahead of the dream he had had that day.

The day he secretly left the capital, following Emperor Katchian’s plan, and had managed to sneak into the depths of Peletta Castle in the dark. Bizarrely, he had succeeded in hiding in the lord’s chamber, in relatively good shape, without encountering the Knights or Nathan Zuckerman that he had expected to face.

The man he encountered as soon as he entered greeted him with a faint smile, his sharp, gaunt face looking as if he was pleased to meet a long-lost friend.

“…”

Yuder held his sword, looking around cautiously, but Kishiar did not move an inch. His deeply sunken red eyes were fixed solely on Yuder, not even glancing at the divine sword.

With an indescribable emotion, just like that.

“Shall I pour some tea? Ah, but I need to fetch the teapot and cups.”

“Do not move. I believe you already know why I am here.”

“To play a tactical game?”

“I bring the Emperor’s decree.”

Though he knew what it meant, the smile on his pale cheek did not change a bit. An inscrutable smile, as if mocking his opponent, or

as if he had been waiting for this all along. His eyes betrayed neither discomfort nor fear, and there was no sign that he intended to rise and punish the armed intruder. His guard was naturally stimulated by this appearance, where no hostility was shown, yet, on the other hand, the man's behavior felt strangely acceptable.

"Yes…… I see."

Yuder watched his own face as he frowned and spoke.

"Is that all?"

Kishiar's eyes narrowed, and a remarkably calm answer for a man facing death flowed out.

"I have no regrets. …Just a bit of regret."

"What do you mean?"

Yes… from here on, his memories were different.

But what he had remembered or thought he had remembered before was now meaningless. Yuder wanted to know the next part, and even what came after that.

Kishiar spoke of his vessel, just as in the dream Yuder had had before. Seeing the same scene twice had nearly eliminated the shock.

"If the injury I sustained by touching that stone hadn't shattered my vessel…… what would have happened?"

Ah.

Finally, the words that had faded away before he could hear them last time flowed out.

There was indeed more to come.

Yuder tried to see Kishiar more clearly, shivering slightly. The bloodless lips moved very slowly in the dim darkness.

“Of course, “what-ifs” are meaningless… but still. Could it have been a bit better?”

Yuder saw the tip of his sword tremble slightly. It was a clear, unmistakable disturbance, and he knew exactly the emotions his past self must have been feeling, even without a sound.

Questioning. Confusion, anger… all negative emotions mixed together.

“You look like you don’t know what I’m talking about. Yes. Think of this as mere drunken babbling. It’s all just a joke. I know best that it means nothing. Now is the best time.”

Kishiar chuckled softly. But that laughter turned into a stifled cough a moment later. The man, raising his gloved hand to wipe his mouth, swallowed his cough with a throaty noise, then sighed deeply and leaned back in his chair. In that moment, Yuder read an intense and deep fatigue from Kishiar’s shoulders, layered over time like thick, blue dust.

With a face akin to a piece of bark hanging from the end of a withered branch, the man looked at the assassin standing before him.

“I have no intention of getting up from here.”

“…”

“Now, let’s see the skills of the one who followed me after a long time.”

Yuder’s hand, which held the sword, tightened with strength at the taunting jest. The bones of his protruding hand and the tips of his

fingernails turned pale.

But a moment later, Yuder swung his sword no more and spat out words not found in his memory.

“…You have not answered.”

His voice was filled with a painful and perplexed tone, as if he couldn’t believe he was doing this himself.

“What’s regrettable is that you still haven’t answered.”

Kishiar blinked his eyes, with an expression as if he hadn’t expected such a response. Yuder glared at him, grinding his teeth and spoke the words, biting them off one by one.

“If… if you regret it, surrender now. If you intend to do so, I can at least help you deliver the message to His Majesty…”

“…”

“This is truly the last chance and question I can offer you.”

“My goodness… Unbelievable. The one who came to kill me is now offering to help?”

A bitter smile spread across Kishiar’s face. While the previous sullenness had completely turned into a sincere smile, Yuder’s face only hardened further.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe, but I…”

“No. I believe. It’s too sincere, that’s the problem.”

The man who answered firmly swallowed a low cough once again. A heavy question remained where the sound of coughing disappeared.

“Do you intend to betray the Emperor, Commander of the Cavalry?”

“If His Majesty hears my story, it cannot be betrayal. Of course, if I have nothing to convey…”

“This is a decision made by one who has ambitious challenges to break free from the old age; there won’t be any mistakes. The new Emperor is testing whether he can build a wall by pressing his surroundings with the intact Cavalry and its trusted Commander. I hope you pass this test.”

“…What do you mean?”

“I’ve bet everything on you. Because I’m selfish and greedy.”

Kishiar gave an inexplicable answer and laughed listlessly.

“So, I have no intention of begging for forgiveness or craving a conversation. This must happen. For you and for me.”

“…”

“You have no idea how hard I worked to have this conviction. I promised to tell you the answer I found a long time ago, and I’m really sorry to only keep it now.”

“What are you… talking about…?”

“The mysterious ‘connection’ I committed to you. Remember?”

Thump.

At that moment, something once again filled Yuder’s previously empty chest.

Though simply described as a connection, he understood immediately that it was related to an accident during the second

gender manifestation. Had Kishiar talked about that on that day? Why?

In the midst of immense confusion, only the calm voice continued.

“Perhaps what connected that day went beyond our bodies, something deeper… something like a soul. After a long search for what to do to sever something invisible, I concluded that I could achieve the best result with my power.”

“What are you talking about? Why now…?”

“…Because there’s no other time.”

Kishiar tilted his head and smiled with a weary face.

“So I will decline the tender and virtuous suggestion you have made. Only the lamentation that it will not be remembered by posterity is regrettable.”

It was a cold joke. A graceful and cruel meaning of refusal.

But at the same time, contradictorily, Yuder felt a vast pain rising like a tsunami from deep within his heart. Whether it was anger, sorrow, or agony, he could no longer distinguish.

Whether all this pain was his own, or,

Even if it was Kishiar’s.

“…It will be over soon. Until all connections are forcibly severed… and then…”

In the quiet darkness, a faint voice rang out.

A lightning-like shock struck down, and everything went dark…

“…”

Yuder blankly stared at the ceiling, only then realizing that he had woken from his sleep. Hearing the sound of his heart beating furiously amidst a pounding headache and shock, he heard someone’s voice not far away.

“Are you awake?”

A heavy and gruff voice from Enon.

Turning his head, he saw a haggard face sitting under the lavish chandelier of the room, incongruent like a crumpled bundle. Seeing Enon’s face looking angrier than ever, yet with a hint of relief in his eyes, Yuder’s sense of reality slowly returned.

“Do you know who I am?”

“…Enon.”

“Ha. Yes. You seem fine.”

Glancing reflexively around, Yuder realized that Kishiar was not there.

‘I remember… moving through the passage while nestled in Kishiar’s arms. What happened after that?’

“You, while fighting, took medicine and threw up a bowl of blood and fainted. Do you remember fainting?”

“…No.”

“You did well. Very well.”

Hearing the clear irony in the praise made his heart feel a bit heavy.

He thought he was fine, but maybe the effect of throwing up quite a bit of blood was significant. Regardless, the hall and its surroundings were incomparably serene compared to before.

“…Where is the Commander?”

“The first thing you ask after waking up is that?”

“I’m sorry to you. But at that time, I thought it was a situation where I needed to take the medicine…”

“Enough. Let’s stop talking about that. I thought you would say something like that, but hearing exactly those words annoys me.”

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Chapter 402

Enon, who cut off Yuder's words in an instant, came closer and sat down. Eyes resembling his favorite lemons stared intently at Yuder's face, specifically aimed at his left eye.

"So that settles it."

"What?"

"Your eye."

Enon picked up a small decorative mirror that had been lying on the table and handed it over.

"According to the Commander, your left eye was shining gold, but when I came and turned the eyelid over, it was not. But when you woke up, it was the same, so it's certain that it has returned to its original color."

Taking the mirror, Yuder was slightly surprised to realize that both his eyes were indeed the same color. The gold he had seen himself had vanished without a trace, leaving behind a look no different from before his injury.

'The color… has returned.'

He looked strangely at his own eyes, whose deep shade had been the subject of countless remarks about its terrifying appearance. No matter how closely he looked, the only other color present was a faint violet that momentarily reflected the light, as was usually the case. It was an ordinary and familiar phenomenon that occurred when light hit the overly dark shade.

"I also saw the gold in my eye… What happened?"

“Well, I can only guess one thing. During the magic that erased the traces of amplification, the absorbed magic power remained attached inside and eventually flowed out with the disappearing toxicity.”

“Is that something that can happen?”

“Eyes are as good a place for magic to linger as the heart is. Ever heard the story that when ancient great mages used magic, their eye color changed to the color of their magic?”

“…I think I have.”

“It’s a phenomenon called the ‘Eye of Magic.’ Something similar happened to you.”

Enon went on at length with his explanation of magic, but the point was concise. It seemed as though something had pierced through Yuder’s left eye like a path for magic, due to the toxicity and magic that had remained in his body.

“It might not have been visible due to the poison stain, but after it disappeared, the magic started to appear. It’s only in one eye for you, but it’s usually something that only great mages can do.”

“I don’t see anything different from before.”

“It hasn’t been long since your eye recovered, that’s why.”

Enon told Yuder that his left eye might react more sensitively to magic or other energy than before and that he might be able to see things he couldn’t previously see. It was an unimaginable power for now.

‘…Well, I’m not going to become a mage, so I should be satisfied with the mere fact that my eye has recovered.’

As Enon paused to gather his thoughts, Yuder put down the mirror. Then he noticed something different in his bare hand, which was without gloves. A strange sight, replacing the vanished black spots. Spiderweb-like violet specks spreading along the veins of the back of his hand.

“What is this……”

“Oh, right, yes. There was that too.”

Enon looked down at Yuder’s hand and muttered somberly.

“Didn’t you see those spots spread before you fainted?”

“…I didn’t know.”

How could he have known what was happening inside his gloved hand in the chaos of battle? He hadn’t even noticed the light coming from his eyes. What’s more, what had merely looked like spreading dots under his skin was now startlingly transformed into something that resembled veins.

Yuder looked down in alarm at the faint spots that had almost faded before he came west but had now darkened again as much as when they first appeared. Slowly rolling up his sleeve, he noticed that the spots, looking like streaks of blood, had spread quite a bit on the hidden part of his arm, but thankfully, they hadn’t gone past his elbow.

Yuder clenched and unclenched his fist several times. Despite its more grotesque appearance than before, there was no pain.

“It doesn’t hurt though.”

“It doesn’t hurt? Is that all you have to say? Huh? How many times did I tell you to think carefully before taking that medicine?”

Enon replied, his face filled with rage, and clenched his fist. He was evidently struggling to contain his desire to punch. If it would calm him down, Yuder was willing to take a punch or two, so he even considered bowing his head, but Enon eventually relaxed his clenched fist.

“Yeah… It’s my fault for being weak and giving you the medicine. It’s my fault, not yours. I should be the one to blame, not you.”

“Don’t say that, Enon. If it weren’t for that medicine, I wouldn’t have been able to escape so easily. If you’re angry, just be yourself as usual. Don’t blame yourself.”

“You really demotivate me, you know,” Enon said, slumping his shoulders, looking utterly defeated.

“You wake up and say that without changing your expression one bit? What kind of life have you lived, you young kid?”

“You know. It’s not that hard.”

“…Compared to me, everyone’s life is hard!”

Perhaps due to his mood, Enon’s expression seemed more troubled than before as he answered.

“Anyway, now that you’re awake, let’s test something. Try using some strength on anything.”

Yuder didn’t ask why. Lifting his hand, where purple lines had spread like a messy drawing, he lightly exerted force, and a small flame ignited with a whooshing sound.

At that moment, the lines on his hand contracted and expanded erratically, and the color of his left eye changed. Unlike before, when the light seemed to blaze brightly within his pupils, this sudden

transformation occurred silently. Enon observed the change without surprise, just furrowing his brow, then nodded.

“Now, make it go away.”

As the flame vanished, the color of his eye returned to normal. The spots on the back of his hand remained, but inside the rolled-up sleeve, the faintest areas were still wriggling, moving along the streaks of blood.

“Again.”

Enon made Yuder repeat the action several times before letting out a sigh. Yuder, sensing that he could stop now, ignored the still-wriggling spots inside his wrist and lowered his sleeve.

“Is there any pain?”

“No.”

“It’s a relief that there’s no pain, but it seems the hasty consumption of the medicine and continuous use of the Awakener’s power to adjust the toxicity has caused some side effects.”

Enon succinctly explained why he had Yuder exert his strength and what he thought the results meant.

“Every time you use the Awakener’s power, the red energy not yet fully absorbed through your hands, and the remaining magic energy in your eyes seem to move together. We need to keep an eye on it, but… perhaps the innate magic energy you originally possessed might also be affected.”

“…My magic energy?”

“Every member of this world, including humans, naturally possesses magic energy to survive, whether they are a mage or

not.”

Just as a body would reject the blood of a stranger if it did not match, naturally, the result of someone else’s magic power entering a body was that it would not linger long and would vanish. However, the power of Kishiar that Yuder had absorbed from a massive spell cast to remove the specific magic effects that had settled in a human body seemed to linger for some reason. It had not disappeared and seemed to have fully adapted, moving as if it were a part of the body itself.

‘Had the body transformed into a medium that accepted and absorbed external forces? Or was it something else…’

“Anyway, we’ll need to investigate further, but your hand is quite noticeable. It would be best to continue wearing gloves.”

Indeed, if someone saw a hand writhing like this, they would likely scream and run away. As there would be no benefit to being remembered so intensely by others, Yuder silently nodded.

“And the rest… honestly, it’s not that bad.”

Enon grimaced, as if extremely reluctant to admit it.

“While you were unconscious, Lusan and I examined you, and the blood you vomited was toxicity escaping from within, and your previously unstable spirit has stabilized considerably. If you have no difficulty or pain when using your power, then the medicine has fully taken effect.”

Yes. That seemed right.

The sensation of pain that had been burning his body, and the blood he had vomited, rather than weakening him, felt like something was burning away and trying to purge a build-up. Even if the power of the red stone, which had almost been absorbed into Yuder’s body,

had flared up once more when something stimulated it again, if it didn't cause any problems when using his strength, then all was well.

Yuder finally exhaled deeply, feeling as though he had escaped a long quandary. Now, there was nothing to obstruct his path.

"Enon. So… where is the commander?"

"…"

With a look that seemed to say he never gave up, Enon looked at Yuder, bowed his head, and opened his mouth.

"He waited until he was assured that your condition wasn't serious, and then he left."

"He left? What about Priest Lusan…?"

"That kid is… Ah, he's coming now."

"Sir Enon! I've brought what you asked for. Is this it?"

Lusan, holding a handful of freshly plucked leaves, stopped in his tracks as his eyes met Yuder's.

"Sir Yuder! You're awake."

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Chapter 403

Contrary to Enon's grumpy face, Lusan had honestly taken Yuder's hand and started with a prayer of joy. Little by little, an awkward gratitude welled up while listening to the prayer, expressing relief that no serious trouble had arisen and that the long-standing injuries had improved.

Once the prayer ended, after hearing a brief account from Enon, Lusan opened his mouth with great relief.

"So you don't have to worry as much about this hand as before. That's truly fortunate. You can't imagine how surprised I was when I was suddenly called here in the middle of the night…"

"…I'm sorry."

"No, it's I who should be sorry. Unlike Sir Enon, I haven't been much help, so I feel more apologetic."

"Why are you speaking so nicely? I thought I was being kidnapped and interrogated or something. You were dragged here from sleep too."

While he had guessed that Kishiar must have been incredibly surprised, having vomited blood and even fainted, the reaction from Lusan and Enon at being pulled from sleep seemed to have been more significant than he had imagined. Yuder, recalling the deep scar in the red eyes that looked down at him, closed his mouth and bowed his head in silence.

Lusan quickly extended his hand, assuring that he was fine.

"It's only natural that you were called secretly since you were on a confidential mission with the Commander. Earlier, Sir Enon even

told the Commander such things because he was worried about Yuder. Why are you saying such mean things now…”

“When did I? I never did. Anyway, give me those herbs.”

“Yes, yes, take them.”

Enon vehemently denied it, but Yuder had already heard Lusan’s words. Enon was worried about him and had said ‘such words’ to Kishiar. What did ‘such words’ mean?

“…Enon. Was the Commander not just going out?”

“…I’m going for this.”

“Tell me what that means… Enon.”

Before he had even finished speaking, Enon hurriedly left. Watching his retreating figure, Lusan made a face as if he might laugh.

“…He’s truly remarkable. I knew he wouldn’t be cowed even in front of the Commander, but earlier, he was really…”

“What on earth happened?”

With Enon gone, Lusan was the only one left to speak. Upon seeing Yuder’s gaze, Lusan hesitated momentarily before opening his mouth.

“When I was called and came here, Enon was already here. At that time, the Commander was sitting here, watching Yuder… The atmosphere was not good. It seemed like he didn’t even hear my greeting.”

Kishiar sat quietly, not even changing his blood and dust-stained clothes, watching as Enon and Lusan examined Yuder’s body and infused it with energy. His eyes remained still and dark.

During this time, someone outside continually sought him. Whether it was a Peletta Knight who had run from somewhere in Tainu, a messenger from the security management team, or a servant from Pruelle Van Tain, all called for Kishiar, but he did not respond. Normally, Natan Zuckerman alone might have spoken to him, but strangely, even the Southern Knight looked at his lord with an unknowable expression, unable to easily speak.

Eventually, Enon, his nerves sharpened by the continuous calls from outside, exploded. He turned to Kishiar and opened his mouth with fierce eyes.

“Excuse me, but may I say something?”

‘…’

“This fellow is surprisingly alright, despite how he looks. It’s quite astonishing, considering what he’s been through. So, there’s no need to look at him as though he’s about to die.”

A rough and unrivaled voice made Lusan’s gallbladder chill, but Enon continued speaking.

“But there’s no environment as toxic to the patient as the noise outside. I understand that you want to be angry with me, but it’s incredibly uncomfortable when you interfere like this.”

“Sir Enon!…”

Lusan was startled, but Kishiar laughed softly at those words. The man, waking from a long contemplation and wiping the dried blood from his eye with his hand, stood from his seat with his usual expression shortly after.

“Yes, good. It’s a relief that he’s alright, despite appearances. I’ll leave for a while, so please take care of things.”

The man, who had been looking down at Yuder's face, soon turned and walked away. Nathan Zuckerman also followed him, but just before opening the door, Kishiar paused as if struck by a thought.

His final command was as follows:

"Help Yuder Aile to rest as much as possible, but have someone watch over him until he wakes. If I haven't returned by then, that's the message."

After hearing Lusan's story, Yuder swallowed dryly. He learned the names of some emotions he hadn't known before, but what he was feeling now was different, and he couldn't express it in words.

Only that inside his chest it stung a bit, as if he had just woken from a dream.

"I already knew that the Commander cares for Yuder, but… this time I was really surprised. Yuder must not be harmed even by a scratch from now on. Of course, no one in the Cavalry should be injured either."

Lusan jokingly said, half-seriously, half in jest, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. Yuder could not respond to him.

Afterward, he gulped down very bitter herbal tea and various medicines until he was almost bursting. Whether there was a sleeping drug in it or not, he closed his eyes unknowingly and when he woke up, the presence of the two was gone, and one person was sitting in their place.

At the sight of Kishiar sitting in the dim dawn, Yuder thought the dream had started again. The posture with clenched hands on his knees and the shadowy, haggard eyes looked remarkably similar to then. If it were not for the rainbow-colored flame of the magic heater crackling behind him, he might have doubted his sense of reality.

“…How’s your body?”

A soft voice came. Yuder, calming the momentarily disturbed emotions, cleared his throat and opened his mouth.

“I’m fine. When did you arrive?”

“…”

“It’s dawn. You haven’t slept, have you?”

Kishiar didn’t answer again. It was neither affirmation nor denial. Perhaps he didn’t even want to speak……

‘It’s understandable.’

Yuder breathed out softly and raised himself. As he stepped off the bed, the soft rug wrapped around his bare feet. He approached where Kishiar was sitting, intending to kneel, but Kishiar, as if understanding his intention before he could bend his knee, shook his head to stop him.

With no other choice, he stood straight in front of the seated man and opened his mouth.

“I apologize.”

“…”

“I have caused you worry and concern with my immature judgment. I should have told you about the medicine that Enon provided, but…judging that the condition was not serious and the situation needed to be resolved urgently, I delayed a detailed report. You must have been quite surprised when I suddenly vomited blood and fainted.”

“…”

“Thank you for bringing me here, nonetheless. I’ve heard from Enon and Priest Lusan that you took great care…in many ways.”

Only the sound of the burning magic stone stove resonated louder in the silence. It was so quiet that one might even hear the beating of one’s heart. At that moment, Kishiar finally relaxed the strength in his hands that were resting on his knees.

From the space where the ten intertwined fingers like two trees unraveled, there appeared a small, transparent potion bottle that Yuder had given him.

The moment he saw it, a painful cry rang out inside his body.

Yuder could not know what thoughts were in his mind as he watched him lying there, clutching it.

“…I asked Pharmacist Enon, and he said this potion was handed over due to your questions and requests. Is that so?”

“…”

“When I found out that you had taken poisonous medicine for yourself and handed this to me…I could say nothing.”

It was really Yuder who could say nothing. He was about to open his mouth to clarify that he hadn’t wanted Kishiar to feel that way, but Kishiar spoke first.

“That is…”

“You don’t hesitate to hide the process for a better result, no matter what happens to you… You must have thought it acceptable for a greater goal. You were sure it wouldn’t kill you, so you judged it to be so natural, so even if you apologize to me, you will be satisfied with the current result itself.”

Each slowly spoken word pierced his lungs. The red eyes were reading Yuder's inner thoughts very precisely.

"…"

"That certainty hurts me very much, Yuder Aile."

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Chapter 404

There was neither anger nor anything else; just the calmly delivered words. Before the shock could even register, Kishiar continued speaking.

“And so, I’m sorry for that.”

“What… What are you apologizing for?”

“Even considering all the variables, knowing better than anyone that my assistant had such certainty, I’m the one who led us there in the end.”

Yuder was about to open his mouth to tell him not to blame himself. Everything was because of him, and what Kishiar had gleaned from his inner thoughts was not incorrect in the slightest. Yuder could have knelt down on the spot and apologized over and over, but if it would keep Kishiar from getting more tired and send him safely in the dark, he would have drunk the burning potion just as many times.

When he saw the scar deep in Kishiar’s eyes, he felt something akin to regret for a moment. However, having dreamed a long-ago dream and awakened anew, such sentimental thoughts had long since vanished. It was his fault. He was Yuder Aile. And probably would be in the future as well.

But, as he met Kishiar’s inscrutable, powerful gaze, all of this became difficult to articulate. Seeing Yuder’s hesitant face, the corners of Kishiar’s lips faintly lifted.

“I’ve thought about it ever since I returned here. Just as my assistant has judged right, drinking the potion, and ultimately seizing what he desired, I would have ended up taking you to that place with

me, regardless of how many times the situation repeated. My conclusion would not have changed.”

Because in the end, he did not doubt that it was right.

The slowly uttered voice carried heat, sinking hotly into his ears.

“So who can we blame? What I said to you is something I should say to myself as well.”

“…”

“Perhaps as long as we’re together, the same pain will keep repeating. But, if that fact discourages us from doing anything, then what could we have started in the first place?”

Yuder looked down at the transparent potion bottle that Kishiar was slowly rubbing between his hands, listening to his words. A sensation that felt both familiar and unfamiliar swirled slowly in his chest.

“So don’t apologize to me even if the same thing repeats in the future. I know that’s your kindness. But I don’t want to see someone who has courageously faced and overcome himself kneeling to comfort my mere pain.”

“…”

“Don’t diminish the judgment you thought was right in such a way. I’ll deal with my pain on my own.”

“But…”

“Didn’t you promise to accompany me on my path forever?”

Yuder’s words stuck in his throat for a moment.

He had promised Kishiar.

The future of Kishiar La Orr’s newly formed Cavalry unit. A time when the useless and rejected Awakeners would finally take their rightful place in the world. He had vowed to go with him to the end of that long road.

“As long as you don’t forget that, it’s enough.”

Kishiar’s eyes curved gently into a smile. Above the red irises, the shadows of multicolored lights leaped incessantly, reminiscent of the fireworks display held in the capital every New Year’s Eve. In that tragic yet vibrant beauty, Yuder momentarily lost himself.

It was different.

Everything was different, to the point where he felt embarrassed for having momentarily mistaken the shadow of dawn on his face for ‘that day’s’ Kishiar. Everything was different…

“Why are you making that face? You look like a child who doesn’t know what to do because they haven’t been scolded.”

“…I am past the age for such a childish comparison.”

He responded reflexively, but in fact, he himself felt that Kishiar’s words were not entirely wrong.

He had thought it would be natural for Kishiar to be angry. He exhaled heavily, thinking about what he needed to do to erase even a small part of the deep scars etched in Kishiar’s eyes. But when the situation turned out to be the opposite of what he had anticipated, he didn’t know what to do.

“Think simply,” Kishiar extended his hand. Yuder hesitated for a moment, then took it, and sat on his knee as he was pulled.

“In the end, being alive means you can do anything.”

‘…Being alive means you can move forward.’

Mixed with Kishiar’s words, a voice that was the same but a slightly different statement spread inside him, like ripples on the surface of water.

‘What was that?’

Yuder blinked blankly.

Had he heard those words from Kishiar before? When? He tried to think more clearly, but the ripples, like a small stone that had been thrown, had quickly sunk without a trace. Above his furrowed brow, Kishiar raised a question, holding his hand up.

“Does your hand not hurt? According to Lusan, even his divine power can hardly change it now.”

“Ah… Yes. It’s fine since it doesn’t hurt. It moves every time I exert strength, but…”

“I see. It still seems to be moving a bit. Has the power seeped into the veins?”

Kishiar, who had lifted Yuder’s hand, let out a soft breath, looking at the ragged line along his arm. Yuder flinched when Kishiar’s breath touched the back of his hand, but he quickly shut his mouth, recalling the words that had said to leave his own pain to himself.

“I’m not sure about that yet.”

“Okay. Then… how about your eye?”

“My eye is fine.”

“Don’t you feel bad that your power is leaking every time you use your ability?”

Yuder lifted his head to meet the gaze looking down at him. Kishiar had apparently already received a report on that part.

“Why would it?”

In fact, whether one eye turned gold or red, or was covered in black spots and not visible at all, it was heavenly compared to before. His halved field of vision had widened, and he no longer lost his sense of distance. As long as it didn’t distract him during battle, it didn’t matter since he himself couldn’t feel the color change.

“Could you… show me?”

Kishiar asked cautiously. It was not difficult. A stream of water generated from thin air spiraled softly between Yuder’s fingers as soon as he raised one. At the same time, golden light sprang from the inner corner of his left eye.

“Is it done?”

“Yes. It has really changed. But it’s a bit different from that time.”

When his eye color first changed, it emitted a bright light even in the darkness, but now it was not that intense. Yuder flinched at the touch of the cool fingertips moving from under his left eye, across his eyelid to his ear, and then back again, but he obediently offered his face.

“I will remove it now.”

“Okay.”

Yuder withdrew his power, and at the same time, the golden pupil shrank. But Kishiar’s gaze remained fixed in the same place. Yuder silently waited for him to speak.

“The feeling is peculiar.”

“If it’s too strange, I’ll think about a solution.”

“When you were with me, you seemed so unreasonably fussy, but curiously, you’re beautiful.”

“Really?”

Kishiar did not repeat himself. Instead, he gently changed the subject and informed Yuder of the matters he had dealt with while Yuder had slept. All the while, he wore a smile.

Despite not joining them, a report that Pruelle and Ever had succeeded in opening the way to the 4th-floor dungeon. Although the underground storage had been wrecked, the tavern maintained an abnormally usual appearance, and Baron Willhem seemed to know nothing about it. Then the news that Nathan Zuckerman had destroyed the bottles of Infinity, forever eradicating the dangerous drugs of Calanesa inside.

Ordinarily, Yuder would have focused on those astonishing revelations, but today, Yuder couldn’t tear his gaze away from the smile that appeared on Kishiar’s face as he spoke.

Kishiar must have once been a person who smiled like this.

A sincerity revealed, not hidden between eyes that seemed to have swallowed all the secrets of the world. Unlike natural beauty, it was a product carved and chosen through the path he had lived. How special must one feel to be allowed to share such contrasting charm? Did that man truly understand?

After thinking to that point, a smile from a previous life he saw in a dream overlapped with the current one.

How would it have been if he had shown him such a smile back then? Would something have changed?

…Could it have changed?

There were still many holes within Yuder. Some things had been filled, but others might never be. But one thing was clear: all of this was related to the man before him.

Yuder recalled the thin thread-like energy he had witnessed in the darkness of the secret storage. If it was the same energy that Kishiar had seen when he found him in the Great Sarain Forest, what could its identity be?

The inside of his mouth and tongue tingled as if wanting to say something. Yuder looked down at the small glass bottle still clutched in his hand, even after all the talk had ended.

Since escaping the secret storage and handling all those matters, without even a moment's rest, anyone, even a Swordsmaster, would be tired. But he had ignored all of that, prioritizing Yuder and staying here without even taking the medicine.

Suddenly, he remembered the dream man, suppressing coughs within his tightly closed mouth.

An almost unique pain that even the patient, current Kishiar had said he couldn't endure. It was pain related to the vessel, suffered just before becoming an Awakener.

The pain that a man, strong as iron refined through thousands of smeltings, considered death preferable to bear. Was he swallowing that kind of pain now?

For what purpose?

"…Commander, will you ultimately not take it?"

Unable to hold back, Yuder spoke, and Kishiar smiled slightly.

“Do you want me to drink it?”

“If it’s not uncomfortable since I gave it to you… I wish you would.”

“Now?”

Now. When Yuder nodded, Kishiar silently fiddled with the bottle for a moment, then opened the cap. Only after watching the potion flow smoothly down his throat did Yuder feel entirely free from the remnants of the dream.

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Chapter 405

“I still can’t believe it. That I’ve been there.”

As soon as morning arrived, the first to rush to Yuder’s side was Ever, who didn’t know precisely what had transpired with Yuder the previous night. Hence, she was initially startled to see the black spots gone, and his eyes cleanly healed, but soon congratulated him with a joyous face.

What followed was the revelation about the hidden basement on the fourth floor of the Security Management Team’s dungeon, which she had uncovered with Pruelle the night before.

“Truth be told, I didn’t think Prince Pruelle would take the initiative so aggressively at first, so I was thinking we should act after the Commander and Yuder arrived,” Ever explained.

Though Ever had followed the secretly visiting Baron Willhem to discover that the basement’s fourth floor truly existed, they needed to break through an ancient magic called ‘Protection of Blood’ to enter.

Only the blood relatives of the mage who had placed the enchantment could open the ancient magic entrance. The mechanism was hidden between the wall of the third-floor dungeon Yuder had discovered, and a place engraved with the Tain family’s sigil.

Ever knew that blood, not completely wiped off near the sigil after Willhem’s escape, was left behind. But asking Pruelle outright for his blood seemed awkward due to his sensitive status.

Even though he was a polite young man who was highly cooperative with her and dreamt of joining the Cavalry, Pruelle van

Tain was still a natural nobleman, carrying the Tain family's bloodline. Therefore, Ever decided to proceed cautiously and waited for Kishiar to finish his warehouse work and join them, but no matter how long she waited, he didn't show. Surprisingly, it was Pruelle who persuaded her as time was running out.

"I must show Deputy Commander Beck the extent of my determination," he said, cutting his palm with a dagger. Fearlessly smearing the flowing blood on the Tain family's sigil and sprinkling it around, it didn't take long for the ground before them to shift, revealing hidden stairs leading down to the fourth floor.

"The cells of dungeon floor four really did have people trapped inside. I initially thought the bodies were piled up since there was a magic circle that forced the imprisoned to sleep, but I was able to gather information from the one person who was awake," Ever continued.

He was a captive brought with his siblings, fortunate enough to be tied in an area where the magic circle was slightly damaged, so he could stay conscious. Ever and Pruelle obtained information about the secret dungeon from him. It was protected by magic so strong that even Ever's mightiest punch couldn't break it, and could only be opened and closed by special means.

"Those who slept in there were only able to wake briefly to eat food brought by Baron Willhem every few days. Oddly enough, it seemed like they felt no hunger or thirst in there," she recounted.

"Not needing to eat or drink, not acting noisy, and having no chance to escape, it must have been the perfect place to hide people," Pruelle remarked.

"Who on earth created such a dreadful and disgusting secret dungeon?" Yuder asked, unable to conceal his anger about the basement's fourth floor from Ever.

“Ever, is the person who gave you information the Awakener who kept shouting to announce the existence of the fourth floor?”

“Yes, he was indeed someone who could control sound.”

Although it was an ability useless for escaping, Yuder had taken the call for rescue seriously and not dismissed it as mere ghostly noise. Because of Yuder, the captive was able to meet the Cavalry.

He had spared no effort in sharing with Ever and Pruelle the information he had gathered from Baron Willhem, not just regarding the prison but other matters as well, and he promised to fully cooperate with the Cavalry’s plan for escape.

“And I made that man swallow the fruit that the Commander gave.”

The fruit that Kishiar had handed over to Ever through Finn Eldore for this mission made it easier to track the person who consumed it. Originally intended for tracking dogs, a few members of the Cavalry within the security management team had a sense of smell even better than dogs.

‘Baron Willhem will surely go to free those who are trapped there, with the auction ahead. That’s when the Cavalry will make their move.’

Even after Pruelle and Ever finished the mission and returned, Baron Willhem had not yet discovered the truth. It was a flawless success.

“You managed well by assessing the situation properly, even without me. That’s reassuring.”

“It’s all thanks to Prince Pruelle.”

Ever seemed to be very pleased with Pruelle's impression of the matter. Had Pruelle heard it, he would have been delighted, but unfortunately, he was not present. He had momentarily left to finalize the information collection, now that they were nearing the end.

"But what happened yesterday that prevented you from coming to the security management team? I was really worried when I only heard something had come up."

"Haha. Quite a few unexpected things happened here."

Hearing from Kishiar about what had happened in the warehouse the night before, Ever was relieved that everyone had safely returned but reacted gravely to the information about the southern merchants.

"It's a relief that you finished everything in that situation, but… the fact that such a skilled Awakener is a close aide to Duke Tain concerns me. Prince Pruelle seemed completely unaware that there is an Awakener among them."

"I would bet not only Prince Pruelle but also Baron Willhem and Duke Tain don't know that there is an Awakener. If they knew, they would never have been able to build such a relationship of trust."

That thought had occurred to Yuder yesterday as well. The idea that such a highly skilled individual was a mere merchant was hardly believable.

"The fact that we don't know their purpose is troubling."

"Fortunately, through yesterday's fight, a clue has emerged."

Kishiar casually replied to Yuder's muttering.

"Did you notice when you poured water on the bag of Calanesa yesterday? That person tried to protect the bag."

“Yes.”

How could he forget? It was the first time the Southerner, who had successively faced Nathan and Kishiar without caring about the items breaking around him, had tried to protect something. Of course, everything inside had already been replaced except for the shelf, but the southern merchant didn’t know that.

“Everything inside was secretly brought by Duke Tain through the Great Sarain Forest. Then, where did they come from?”

“I’ve heard that most of the goods traded through the Great Sarain Forest come from the countries that border the forest.”

“Yes. But that’s just the last destination of those goods in the western countries, not the first place of origin.”

Kishiar responded as if posing a riddle, then continued, looking into Yuder’s eyes.

“The raw material for Calanesa is the Calain flower. And the climate where that flower thrives is hot and dry.”

There was only one place on the continent with the hottest and driest climate. The vast and distant land south of the desert: the Southern Countries.

“The Empire, of course, and even in neighboring foreign countries, in order to bring in such a large quantity of a drug that has not even spread its name properly, there must naturally be those closely related to its origin, mustn’t there?”

Kishiar let out a cold smile.

Yuder’s mind raced as Yuder looked at Kishiar.

“Then… Baron Willhem and Duke Tain seemed unaware of the disturbance that happened last night, and the reaction of the tavern was quiet all along. It could be related to them as well.”

“I think so,” Kishiar responded, offering a look of praise.

“The power that can hide an incident that happened last night so that no one knows, and thereby seems to gain something, isn’t there only one at present? Even though so many items were broken, it was deemed to be something that could be hidden. It also means that the swap for the fake items wasn’t detected, but at the same time, it allowed us to guess the intentions of the southern merchants.”

They had come here to move Duke Tain’s goods, but in reality, the most important thing they likely cared about was Calanesa powder.

‘They might have arranged for the profit gained by importing and distributing it to go more to their side than to Duke Tain, or perhaps they came with the intention of making a big gain without properly informing the Duke of the value of the drug. In that case, they wouldn’t want to ruin the Duke’s trust by unnecessarily creating a big fuss.’

“Truly despicable people. To bring such a drug so casually into the Empire and try to sell it off…”

Ever, who had heard from Kishiar what kind of potent drug Calanesa powder was, grimaced without mercy, imagining what might happen if it spread.

“Yes. There are a few more points to be caught, but the answer is not yet certain. Therefore, if possible, I would like to catch them all this time.”

“Excuse me for a moment.”

Then, a polite knock came from outside the door. The person who opened the door and entered was a Tain family servant, but his appearance soon changed to that of Pruelle van Tain. He smiled, apparently happy that Ever was still there, and then respectfully handed a small bundle of paper to Kishiar.

“Did you have a peaceful night, Your Highness? I have finally completed the list of those who came here during last year’s party.”

“You must have been busy visiting the security management team yesterday, and yet you completed this too?”

“The surrounding information was already collected, and it only needed final verification when Baron Willhem confirmed the party date and sent out invitations, so it was not too much trouble.”

Pruelle, who humbly responded, watched Kishiar’s face as he began to read the paper, his eyes tense. The time had come for the final evaluation of the information and efforts he had brought.

“…Hmm.”

“How is it?”

“Excellent.”

Kishiar laid down the paper, filled from front to back, and praised it.

“To have organized so perfectly the list of those invited last year, those who sent out invitations this year, and even the southern merchants who visited at that time. It will not be difficult to detect any foul play just by reading this. You have had much trouble checking and recording everything individually.”

“Not at all. I’m glad if it was helpful.”

Pruelle’s freckled nose reddened slightly.

“Then are you now planning to leave for the capital as is?”

“Yes. The work is all finished, and I cannot delay another day, so I will leave either this evening or tomorrow morning. My younger brother Nipollen, as I told you before…”

“Leave him to me.”

Ever stood up from her seat and confidently interjected. Pruelle, who met her gaze, lifted the corners of his mouth, his face expressing great relief.

“Yes. That will do.”

“I heard you injured your hand yesterday, and I see you still have it wrapped.”

As Kishiar said, Pruelle, who had bravely penetrated the “Protection of Blood” by cutting his palm in the security management team’s dungeon the previous night, was still wrapping his hand with a handkerchief instead of a bandage.

“Meet Priest Lusan before you leave.”

“No, no. It’s not that bad. I’m fine.”

“It might be hard to ride a horse if your hand is uncomfortable.”

At Kishiar’s suggestion, the red-haired youth furrowed his eyebrows as if he were troubled, but soon cautiously opened his mouth.

“I’m really fine. The wound itself has almost completely healed using the holy water I brought, and this is just… um, something I continue to do because protection is needed until it’s fully healed.”

Pruelle, having answered, bowed politely towards Ever, who was staring at him with wide-open eyes.

“Can I return this to you the next time I see you, Deputy Commander Beck?”

“Oh, yes. Of course, that’s fine. You have a long journey, so you can throw it away without any burden if you like…”

“Throw it away?”

Pruelle responded forcefully.

“How could I throw away the symbol of warm compassion you bestowed upon me yesterday? I will surely return it to you, so please wait.”

Ever blinked, not noticing the strange passion in his voice, and nodded.

“Yes…”

“Now, everyone will be busy, so let’s get on with our respective duties.”

Kishiar, who had been watching them, waved his hand with a peculiar smile.

“Contact me anytime through the predetermined route if there are any changes.”

That Baron Willhem had set the date for the party meant that the date for the secret auction had also been determined.

‘Nahan is surely watching from somewhere.’

Those who wanted to take revenge on Duke Tain would surely appear somewhere, inflict significant damage, and attempt to find

and take away the Awakeners among those who were victimized and trafficked.

However, there was no worry or fear. Kishiar and those following him had already finished all possible preparations and felt confident.

‘…Whichever side it is, come prepared for things not to go your way.’

Strengthening his resolve, Yuder clenched his gloved hand tightly.

And a week later, finally, numerous carriages began to line up and enter the widely-opened mansion of the Willhem family and within the gates of Tainu.

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Chapter 406

“Finally, the day has come.”

Baron Willhem looked out of the window with a stern face. The doors of the mansion that had remained closed due to all sorts of ghastly events were open as they once were, after a very long time. A rare emotion of being moved seemed to seep into his withered heart at the sight.

The Tainu knights, standing majestically in front of the grand entrance, were checking the invitations of the incoming guests while dressed in beautiful armor, polished especially for that day. Carriages of distinguished guests that had rushed from various parts of the west were as splendid as the magnificent mansion itself.

There were no signs to be found of the aftermath of the horrible events that had occurred.

On such a day, a shabby carriage that seemed to be there for official business foolishly mingled with the party guests, only to be driven away. Watching the scene, the Baron turned his back to the window. His butler was waiting, head politely bowed, for his master’s orders.

“Has all the communication from the auction been received?”

“Yes. The inspection and transportation preparations of the goods are all in progress. The security management team has prepared for your visit at any time, and the warehouse reports no problems, according to the Southerners.”

“Eh? Those brutes themselves? What is Jacob doing?”

Baron Willhem mentioned the name of the old proprietor who ran the tavern where the secret warehouse was located. Normally, communication related to the warehouse was his responsibility.

“The Southerners have been contacting us these last few days. Jacob recently insolently requested more warehouse management fees because of his old age and poor health. I suspect he’s neglecting his duties since we ignored that.”

“He did such a careless thing at such a critical time? An ungrateful wretch, even after receiving undue favor for so long. Once this matter is over, deal with him first.”

“Yes. Understood.”

Baron Willhem briefly felt annoyance at the news that the old owner had not contacted him directly, but he couldn’t even imagine that anything had happened there without his knowledge.

‘Southerner brutes are at least competent compared to a stupid commoner. Unpleasant fellows, but they’ve certainly carried out the orders of the Duke Tain.’

“Then proceed to move the items from the warehouse as planned. I’ll visit the security management team at midnight today. Everything must be perfectly timed.”

“Of course. You’ve endured so much hardship. In two days, just like last year, everything will conclude as you have prepared, my lord!”

Baron Willhem smiled at his smooth-talking butler’s words.

‘Yes… just endure today and tomorrow, only two days.’

He had suffered so much because of the contemptible Awakeners who had troubled various parts of Tainu and Duke

Peletta, whose only remarkable ability was to infuriate people. Despite the constant reproaches from Duke Tain, he was proud and bitter to have successfully protected the precious goods until today.

Though, there had been the regrettable accident of losing his younger sibling and sister-in-law in the process, what could be done? Once this was over, the Baron planned to demand compensation for his sibling as well, further securing his wealth and glory through Duke Tain.

‘Duke Tain…’

Baron Willhem opened his mouth, thinking of the face that came to mind from his memories.

“It’s a bit regrettable that the First Son Pruelle went away without seeing the conclusion of this matter. It was an opportunity to demonstrate the relationship between House Willhem and the future Duke Tain.”

“Do not worry too much. Have you forgotten that before Pruelle left, he knew we were short of hands for the party preparation and recommended those who could be of use? There’s no doubt that Pruelle must have helped ardently, considering Tainu as his second homeland, and treating you, my lord, as his family.”

“Indeed, that’s true.”

The Baron secretly wore a pleased smile.

“It was unexpected. After all, Tainu is the place where Pruelle stayed the longest during his young days, and who else would have seen him more frequently than my wife and me, even more than the Duke himself? The mere news of his visit would lead everyone to guess our relationship.”

The Baron had been more than generous to the young children of the ducal family who had stayed in Tainu for several years long ago. He presumed that, like him, Pruelle must have cherished that time as a ‘good memory’, and he was satisfied with this thought.

“Now I must go out and greet our guests. Oh, by the way, what’s the situation over there?”

“The Duke of Peletta will also be coming here soon,” was the reply.

“I see… Thinking that all the nuisances will soon disappear, even seeing that hideous man again seems less repulsive. Hahaha.”

The Baron laughed heartily, his face moving animatedly, having become more gaunt from the stress he had been under. A clear bell sounded in the distance, signaling an hour before the party began.

“Let’s go then.”

Yuder slowly reached out and took the elegantly extended hand of Kishiar. Dressed in a black and white formal suit, Kishiar exuded the air of a duke who was more playful than ever.

His broad shoulders and slender waist, clearly visible without a cloak, the brilliant flower and handkerchief tucked into his breast pocket, all made it evident that whoever saw him was meant to feel he was not here for a conventional or formal occasion. His slightly disheveled forelock and twinkling, mischievous red eyes sparkled through.

“I never thought I would wear this formal attire again.”

“Still, isn’t it more comfortable this time?”

Yuder’s clothing was similar to Kishiar’s formal attire. The only difference was that Yuder’s was accompanied by a long black cloak

that nicely concealed the inner outfit.

As they stepped outside, those waiting for them greeted them all at once. Among them were Nathan Zuckerman, who commanded the Peletta Knights, and Finn Eldore, who had stayed in place of the absent Ever.

Yuder saw Finn blink twice and slightly nod his head, a gesture that might appear to be a simple greeting to others, but was actually a kind of promise and signal between them.

‘Did he finally find something?’

Finn had been wandering near the bars and inns where the southern merchants were, at Yuder’s request, without the other members noticing. Even Yuder couldn’t entirely understand how Finn managed to evade attention.

‘I must investigate this when there’s time.’

The Cavalry had split into two groups that day, as previously agreed. Most were with Ever in the security management team, and the rest remained to guard Baron Willhem’s mansion, where the party was being held.

However, since attendance at the party was strictly limited to invitees, the only ones who could enter the mansion were Kishiar and Yuder Aile, whom he had designated as his partner. Of course, no one in the Cavalry was unhappy about this fact.

“Duke of Peletta… Welcome.”

As they made their way into the main mansion, the servants who had been waiting for them bowed in unison, their bodies bent in polite deference. Yuder, while holding Kishiar’s arm, felt the eyes of those stealthily appraising him flicker over his recently healed left

eye, sensing their surprise turn into disdain and fear. Yet, Yuder's facial expression did not change as he continued to walk.

If those casting their gaze upon Yuder knew that he found their stares almost refreshingly satisfying, as if they were a long-awaited reward, they would have likely been even more taken aback.

The main mansion of the Willhem family was more splendid and dazzling than ever, filled with the majority of the guests. Nobles who hadn't seen each other since last year exchanged warm smiles, and the beautiful sound of music filled the hall with warmth.

Of course, not all the conversations they were having were beautiful, but no one paid any attention to that.

They were waiting for the rumored Duke of Peletta, and for the mysterious events that were to occur in Tainu.

"The Duke of Peletta has arrived," announced a servant, drawing the attention of everyone present.

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Chapter 407

At last, the name that had piqued the curiosity of many resounded through the hall. A man with shining golden hair revealed himself, walking confidently amid curious gazes that failed to conceal their intrigue.

Those present at the gathering had heard rumors of Kishiar La Orr’s remarkable appearance, yet for the majority, this was their first glimpse of him. Most who had thought rumors were as unbelievable as the ever-growing whirlwind in the wilderness were momentarily taken aback upon actually seeing Duke Kishiar La Orr.

The appearance of Duke Kishiar La Orr did not align with any imagination or expectation that had preceded seeing him.

For one, he was so exceptionally tall that it was hard to associate him with the information that he was frail. Under his firm chin, which appeared almost arrogant at first glance, was a flame-embroidered pin that shone vividly on the vest embracing his straight chest, asserting he needn’t bow to anyone. It hung from a silver chain.

The clothes that wrapped his tall and perfect body, seemingly bursting with life, were so captivating that they set hearts pounding regardless of age or gender.

Beside him was a man with black hair, dressed in a similar outfit. The name Yuder Aile was also announced when the Duke entered with his arm, but Kishiar had attracted so many eyes that not many heard his name.

However, when the Duke turned his head, rested it slightly on the side, and embraced the waist of the man holding his arm, the eyes of the people suddenly shifted to the black-haired man. Had he not been holding the Duke’s arm, his calm and cold expression would

not have been thought to belong to the provocative subject of the rumor.

Though neither as gorgeous as Duke Kishiar nor adorned with noticeable jewelry or clothing, the shadowy coolness that the black-haired man possessed had mysteriously drawn attention since the moment it was recognized.

‘Is that the commoner lover who always follows Duke Kishiar?’

‘The one who even shares the bedroom with him…?’

Contrary to the rumors, the black-haired man did not feel like a commoner at all. As people began to murmur at the unexpected appearance, the Duke’s eyes moved as if he had heard them.

Then, Baron Willhem, who had just regained his composure, stepped forward to greet him.

“Welcome, Your Grace, Duke Kishiar. It is an infinite honor that one blessed by the Sun God is attending this meaningful charity party.”

“Baron Willhem. I have been worried seeing you so busy since we witnessed the divine sword together. I’m pleased to see you in good health.”

The moment the word “divine sword” was mentioned, the atmosphere changed. It was the first time that Duke Kishiar had mentioned anything related to the divine sword Orr in public.

‘Was it true that all the priests of the Western Sun God Temple saw the miracle of the divine sword?’

‘Seeing Baron Willhem not saying anything…’

Baron Willhem, who had tried as much as possible to conceal the truth of that rumor, trembled his eyebrows but soon forced a smile.

“That is… I have been so preoccupied with party preparations… I apologize.”

“I still think about your face filled with emotion when you saw the divine sword. God will never doubt your faith. I think it would be fine to have a time like that again before I leave, don’t you?”

No longer wanting to look at Kishiar, who was calmly smiling as if to say, ‘Tell me whenever you want,’ Baron Willhem turned his head to Yuder. Yuder, feeling the eyes meet, quickly bowed his head in greeting.

“Good to see you, Baron.”

“Hmm. Hmm.”

Due to the recent events, the opinion about Yuder Aile within Baron Willhem’s circles had changed. It shifted from ‘a commoner with talent but unlucky enough to catch the eye of the Duke of Peletta and become his prey,’ to ‘a foolish commoner who seems to take being the Duke of Peletta’s plaything as an honor.’

The Baron, who was about to turn away after ignoring the greeting and clearing his throat, suddenly stopped as he realized that something was different in Yuder’s eyes.

“Your eye…?”

“Ah, the Baron indeed has a keen observation. The traces of an injury that lingered in my assistant’s left eye have finally healed completely, I suppose. Being the hero of the Great Sarain Forest, even God has been merciful. It’s something we should all celebrate.”

Kishiar interjected with a loud response, so Yuder did not need to say anything. Instantly, a different sort of murmur spread among those who were standing around them. They all knew what it meant to be the hero of the Great Sarain Forest.

The atmosphere among those who had not known that the man beside the Duke of Peletta was not merely a lucky kept man who caught his eye, but the hero rumored to have defeated a colossal monster of the Great Sarain Forest, changed. Strange looks were exchanged, and a different kind of attention was focused on Yuder.

Yuder ignored those glances, swallowing a cold laugh within himself.

‘They all follow the same pattern.’

The reaction of those who found out that Yuder was the hero of the Great Sarain Forest was all the same. At first, they acted as if they had seen something undesirable, but after learning the fact, their eyes changed as if they had discovered an interesting and useful toy. One could bet money that the next step would follow the same pattern as Baron Willhem, who had come to him asking if he had any intention of siding with the Duke of Tain.

‘And the result would end up like Baron Willhem in the end.’

“Ah, is that… so? I’m truly relieved. You must be… happy.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Behind Kishiar, who was smiling without any apparent worry, a hurried servant approached and whispered something in Baron Willhem’s ear. Yuder didn’t miss the soundless change in the Baron’s eyes.

“I must leave to greet other guests now. Those present here are all members of distinguished families that support the West, filled

with loyalty towards the Empire and compassion for those in need. You will find no shortage of delightful conversation here.”

Baron Willhem offered insincere congratulations and then hurried away.

“He looks quite busy, managing two matters at once.”

Kishiar mumbled, eyeing the Baron’s retreating figure with a bone-chilling tone.

The spot vacated by Baron Willhem was filled by nobles, unable to hide their hyena-like glares. Their words sounded like polite inquiries at first glance, but if you stripped away the beautifully wrapped social pleasantries, they were nothing more than rude blades, pricking to extract information.

Despite the smirking onslaught of those seemingly desperate to uncover the holes in the rumors surrounding Kishiar and Yuder, Kishiar remained calm. He was skilled at seemingly giving his opponents what they sought before smoothly changing the subject at a crucial moment, revealing their base intentions in a laughable manner.

‘There’s no one in this place who can beat Kishiar with words.’

Even Yuder, who had once died and returned, had no confidence in besting Kishiar in speech, let alone those who knew nothing about him.

At first, those who were astonished by Kishiar’s appearance soon undervalued him, looking at him with a male lover, smiling prettily. However, they did not realize that they would be the ones left in a ludicrous state when they actually engaged in conversation.

Kishiar possessed the extraordinary skill to belatedly realize what spectacle he had made of himself, and to be enraged, yet also to

restrain from direct complaint due to an attitude that seemed entirely without malice.

‘It’s as if this entire place has become a massive tactical game board.’

Observing him up close, this feeling was further confirmed. His tactics of employing outlandish words, striking, and retreating at unexpected moments were the same as ever.

He used to really hate such occasions in the past. It felt like a waste of precious time when there was so much to do, and he was considerably fatigued just from ignoring the malicious words.

But now it was different. Watching Kishiar, standing in the same place, amusing the nobles with a smiling face, was quite an entertaining task.

‘Come to think of it, I’ve never seen Kishiar from my previous life participate in a party like this.’

The same was true in this life. At the small gatherings that had been held so far, or at the parties held at harvest festivals, there was no need for Kishiar to act in this way.

But this time was different. It was a difficult occasion where Kishiar La Orr needed to affirm all the rumors that had been circulating about him in front of everyone in the west, and yet maintain the perception that he was a mere duke, to easily carry out this matter.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for waiting.”

At that moment, Baron Willhem’s wife appeared. She skillfully stepped in front of the guests, greeted them, and explained the purpose of the charity party that was to be held today. Applause erupted from all over the place as she elegantly finished her short

speech asking for money to be raised for the development of the western region after enjoying a fine meal and meaningful music.

As the dance began, Yuder noticed that Baron Willhem had vacated his seat at some point and twisted the corners of his lips.

'…He's gone.'

Then it was time for them to take action.

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Chapter 408

Unlike other heavy and formal parties, a party held for the sole purpose of charity fundraising or interaction between relatives, like the one opened today, was traditionally the responsibility of the wives. Therefore, nobody particularly minded the fact that Baron Willhem, having merely greeted the guests, had disappeared, as long as the Baroness maintained her place; dancing wasn't even considered an essential part of the event.

In reality, as soon as the first song began, those who rushed out to dance were mostly vibrant young people. The older ones were more engrossed in polite conversation or admiring the beautiful pieces of art placed throughout the hall.

But what about Duke Peletta, who was rumored to enjoy playing more than eating?

"Good music makes the body itch."

As Kishiar listened to the music and opened his mouth, the eyes of those around him were drawn to Yuder. There were piercing glances of curiosity, wondering if a commoner who knew nothing about dancing could possibly cling to the Duke even here.

Yuder responded to their expectations by deliberately showing discomfort.

"Then may I … be over there for a while?"

"Go ahead."

As Kishiar promptly permitted, a knowing smile mixed in the eyes of the aristocrats. Yuder saw Kishiar, who had been glancing around, approach the Baroness, who was alone, and extend his hand, then

turned his back. Immediately, a few of those who had been with Kishiar approached and began to speak as if they had been waiting.

“Hey, look at this. Yuder …did you say Al? I want to hear a bit about what happened in Great Sarain Forest….”

‘You fool, it’s Yuder Aile.’

Yuder left only the words, “I’m sorry, but it’s difficult now,” while coldly cursing under his expressionless face, and quickly moved on. His appearance as he shook off the other requests and escaped to an area where the hall could not be seen looked like a commoner’s flight filled with shame to anyone who saw it.

“Just as I thought, that’s his limit,” came a voice filled with scorn and pleasure. Yuder headed toward the table filled with small and beautiful foods prepared for the party guests to eat, leaving those voices behind.

Despite the great care taken to prepare the foods, almost none of the aristocrats attending the party had come this far. Only servants scurrying to carry uneaten food were seen around.

Yuder stood in front of a three-tiered plate containing a bite-sized food made of thinly baked square crackers topped with whipped cream and fruit and puckered his lips around a bright golden wine glass. A maid who had come to add new food to the plate stood beside Yuder, her head bowed.

“I don’t recognize any of the food.”

The maid’s hand paused for a moment at Yuder’s mumbled words, spoken as though to himself, his lips hidden behind the glass. She had her long hair coiled up under her hat and possessed ash-colored hair, rarely seen in the Empire.

This maid was none other than Marty, the non-nobleborn from the village of the Star of Nagran, who had lost her memory and was rescued by the Cavalry.

“That’s the case for everyone.”

Marty almost imperceptibly whispered. Yuder continued to fix his gaze on the table, taking small steps along the side.

“Where might the person who commanded the making of these pitiful dishes be now?”

“Before coming up here, I saw a butler politely escorting someone wrapped in a cloak toward the back.”

While coldly answering, Marty continued to put down food and repeatedly arranged it to make it look beautiful. From a distance, it would have been impossible to tell that they were having a conversation.

“I wonder which will happen first: the plates on this table emptying, or the carriages outside disappearing.”

“Regrettably, three have already vanished, so there’s no point in betting.”

“Three?”

“A bird with four wings, a sword with a split end, a sprout with red leaves.”

As the words finished, a new maid appeared carrying another plate. Marty gave a nod to Yuder and then calmly turned to go back the way she came. No one paid any attention to the ordinary-looking maid.

Yuder continued to walk, holding the glass. As he returned to where the dancers were gathered, eager eyes pounced on him again as if expecting some amusing diversion.

Soon a song ended, and Kishiar was lightly kissing the back of the lady's hand in greeting.

"To leave such a wonderful dancer, where has the Baron gone? Shouldn't the next dance be with the Baron?"

"No… My husband has left for a moment to see our daughters…"

As her husband was mentioned, a faint unease and caution surfaced in the Baroness's eyes, which had been half-dazed while dancing.

"Is that so? When he returns, I must apologize for stealing the opportunity to enjoy our first dance."

Kishiar laughed cheerfully and retreated. Yuder watched this and then turned to head to a nearby empty lounge. The eyes of those finding the situation intriguing followed him.

Upon entering, the dim lounge, with a large window, gave a strong impression of a small bedroom with a curtain-able bed and unusually soft sofa. The room was dimly lit, not for the guests' comfort, but actually to help those enjoying secret liaisons during the party to conceal their identities - a fact known to all.

Yuder sat on the sofa, looking out at the brightly moonlit window, sipping the liquor in his hand. To him, it was no different from water, but it was, in fact, quite strong.

One sip, two sips, three sips.

Slowly, but at a regular pace, just as he swallowed the third sip, the door opened, and a familiar fragrance wafted in. A shadow

engulfed Yuder, the sofa sinking as lips met, and the door closed with a harsh noise. Finally, all the astonished gasps and familiar murmurs that had been seeping through the tiny crack disappeared.

“…Haa.”

The intense intruder, after intertwining and sucking the alcohol-soaked tongue, pulled away. It had been just a few seconds, but the heat that was ignited in the darkness and their breathing was hotter than ever before.

Yuder slowly blinked, staring intently at Kishiar’s eyes as he pulled away. Suddenly, between the two pairs of eyes where flames of passion were burning, a soft laugh broke out.

“How is it outside?”

“So far, there are no signs of the Star of Nagran infiltrating here. As expected, Baron Willhem has headed to the security management team, and among the attendees, the families of Chears, Belfrant, and Ketel have already taken their carriages and left.”

“They’re the ones from last year’s list, escaping well.”

“Yes.”

A cold smile danced on Kishiar’s moist lips before it vanished.

“I was a little concerned that they might suddenly suspect the identities of those working on the day, but it seems there’s no need.”

“If they doubt Marty and the others, it would be tantamount to doubting Prince Pruelle himself, so that’s not possible.”

At the party hosted by the Willhem family today, many amnesiacs, including Marty, had come in as temporary workers.

Having lost and then recovered their memories, they willingly volunteered to keep watch, identifying any covert infiltration by Nahan or the Star of Nagran, and silently observing the movements of those departing for the auction and the people of the Willhem family.

Neither Baron Willhem nor anyone else doubted the true identities of Pruelle and his information providers who had been taken under his wing. Even Yuder, who had expected increased vigilance due to Robel's previous attempts to infiltrate as a servant to find those who had lost their memories, was astonishingly unchallenged.

'It was fortunate that Marty has such a good memory.'

Whether it was due to her strong willpower or not, having lost and then quickly regained her memory, Marty learned the crests of the visiting families to the Willhem house faster than anyone and thoroughly memorized her duties. She had already sold her face, so she couldn't infiltrate the mansion and was assigned to the auction area instead, which greatly worried Robel. But from what Yuder saw when they spoke earlier, it had evidently been needless concern.

"Now then… it's time for the support."

Kishiar, taking the glass Yuder had been holding, smiled regretfully as he removed his cloak from his shoulders. It was a special cloak that changed its material and appearance when turned inside out.

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Chapter 409

Having thrown off the cumbersome formal top and donned a cape made of a material that didn't reflect light, the part that had previously appeared to be pinned like fabric caught as an ornament unfurled, revealing a hood.

Enveloped from head to toe in black clothing and with a hood covering Yuder, he had become an entirely different person from just moments before.

"Good. Perfectly like a night guest. No one will think you were a person at the party," Kishiar joked, straightening the hood that obscured Yuder's face, with a playful smile. Yuder opened the window, confirmed that no one was patrolling the area, and then leaped, gripping the upper frame.

"I shall be back."

"Be careful. The rumors of how long I've been playing around here all depend on when you return. Don't forget that."

Kishiar, who had draped Yuder's discarded formal top over his arm, gracefully waved his finger and blew a kiss.

The sensation that had been heightened almost faltered at the princess-like gesture. Yuder merely nodded once in silence, then bounded up to the roof, stepping on the wind.

Today's plan basically involved those in the security management team handling the auction house, while those left in the mansion took care of the party, surveilling those involved with the secret trade of Duke Tain as well as the Star of Nagran. But the auction house, defended only by the Cavalry and the Knights of Peletta, was far riskier than the secure party.

Considering this, more personnel were sent to the security management team, but now with the variable of the southern merchants, all agreed, including Kishiar, that this alone was not enough for assurance.

Therefore, one person, possessing both the quickest mobility and reliable skills, was given a special mission: to move freely between the two groups, distract the attention of others, and provide support in an ever-changing situation.

This role went to Yuder Aile, who had regained his great strength.

Everything that day was like a perfectly orchestrated play, started a week ago when Pruelle completed the list and handed over the party schedule.

Yuder first became Kishiar’s partner at the party, feigned inability to dance, and made contact with Marty to gather information. Meanwhile, Kishiar danced with the Baroness, captivated the nobles’ attention.

The nobles, ignoring Kishiar dancing with the Baroness, only felt a base excitement towards the gossip of Yuder and the following Duke of Peletta heading for the lounge, without questioning what they were doing there.

Perhaps by now, they were all gathered and chattering about what lascivious act might be occurring in the small lounge. Unfortunately for them, Yuder was not there.

The next goal was to quickly retrieve his sword from the mansion while Kishiar stalled in the lounge and swiftly move to the security management team.

Yuder recalled Kishiar’s voice, instructing him perfectly on everything from his steps to the speed of his drinking. From the disappearance of Baron Willhem, Kishiar dancing with the Baroness,

drawing everyone’s focus, and finally both of them conspicuously heading to the lounge, leaving an impression that no one could doubt his absence - nothing had differed from what Kishiar La Orr had anticipated.

All was as if pieces on a board that he had arranged.

If everyone at the party knew that the instruction had gone so far as to make Yuder Aile move in a direction of speaking as little as possible, they would have been astounded. Yuder faintly twisted the corners of his lips into a smile.

Yuder realized anew that Kishiar had considered even such things, and he felt as if he had glimpsed a trace of the man’s path through life.

“To deceive others perfectly, one must first look where no one would think to look.”

Yuder, who had hidden in the shadows and quickly traversed to where the annex was located, landed lightly on a tree, a good hiding spot. It had been easy to get this far, as most of the guards were focused around the main building and entrance.

When he reached out his hand and exerted his power, a sharp whistling wind swept through the entire garden, shaking the grass.

“Yuder?”

A moment later, someone who had received the signal appeared. A blue-haired boy with small, mischievous, yet lovable eyes, Finn Eldore.

Finn looked up at Yuder standing on the tree, grinned, and waved the long sword he was holding. It was Yuder’s sword, taken from his lodging. As Yuder was about to jump down from the tree, Finn lowered his head and spoke softly.

“No, stay there for a moment. I’ll give it to you with my ability!”

As he said this, a mist-like energy flowed from Finn’s hand, and in the blink of an eye, the sword disappeared and reappeared in Yuder’s hand.

Holding it for the first time since the sheath had broken in the Great Sarain Forest, and it had been lying dormant in an ordinary temporary sheath, Yuder felt his blood run hot. He attached the sword to his waist with practiced ease and spoke.

“It seems the speed is similar even when using the teleportation ability alone rather than with two. You’ve practiced a lot.”

“I knew Yuder would understand! You have no idea how hard I’ve worked. Doesn’t your faith soar?”

Finn laughed brightly and joyfully.

“But… what was the signal you sent earlier?”

“Ah, I wanted to tell you about the stories I heard while observing the targets. Nothing special, but I thought it would be best to let you know before we start today. We have to move right away, so I thought it would be better to write it down and slip it into the sheath. Look at it on your way.”

At those words, Yuder looked down at the sheath and saw an additional small piece of cloth tied to the red string attached to the handle.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you? Huh? So don’t cancel the recruitment offer if the information in there is nothing special? They’re Awakeners, but I barely saw them move.”

A faint smile emerged at Finn’s innocent and nonchalant appearance, who seemed to have been most worried about that part.

“…Ah! And there’s one more thing I have to tell you.”

“What is it?”

Finn made a humming sound and scratched his head.

“Kanna is back finally… but not here right now.”

“What do you mean Kanna’s not here?”

“There was a carriage earlier that tried to come in with the party attendees but was chased away. Turns out that carriage had come from the Great Sarain Forest.”

Kanna should have come here sooner from the Great Sarain Forest, but the discovery of a magic ore vein beneath the Magic Spring Ruins changed the situation, delaying the schedule. Yuder had heard that she was really going to depart as soon as that job was finished, but given the time involved, he thought the chances of her not arriving until after this job were higher. That she had arrived today was a surprising event.

“Although I went out late, all I heard was that the carriage had already gone to the security management team, so I came back. It seems that the messenger pigeon’s path was a little twisted, causing the communications to cross.”

‘This is… a welcome variable.’

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Are you going now?”

“Yes.”

“I wish I could go too. Waiting here for those who may or may not come is less appealing than going to the security management team’s place.”

“But you will help me with an ability that only you can perform, won’t you?”

Finn, who had been openly envious, closed his mouth as he looked at Yuder, who had jumped down in front of him. A moment later, a mischievous expression, shy yet unable to hide excitement, appeared on the boy’s face.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Finn Eldore coming out to hand Yuder the sword was not just because of simple friendship, but part of a plan that had been included since he learned that Finn had become able to use teleportation ability by himself.

Finn, arms outstretched towards Yuder, closed his eyes and exerted his energy.

“Just trust me. No one will notice, and I’ll get you perfectly outside the mansion!”

A vapor-like energy began to flow greatly over his small face, drenched in sweat. As that energy grew stronger, covering Yuder, there was an unseen pull, and a sensation as though something was sucking him in.

Yuder, who had closed his eyes with dizziness, realized that he had truly come outside of Willhem’s mansion. Not far off, the knights and soldiers crowding around the mansion’s back door were busy moving around, unable to even imagine that someone had suddenly escaped from within.

Yuder turned his back to them and crept into the darkness. There was not a hint of hesitation in his movement as he flew onto the rooftop.

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Chapter 410

“The weather is quite nice today. I heard you trained late into the night yesterday. Did you rest well?”

Theorado Van Tain, the commander of the Imperial Knights, had looked indifferently at Pruelle, who sat before him, smiling faintly. He had let Pruelle into his office without a second thought, as it was rest time, and there was no particular reason for his sudden visit.

“We were never the kind to meet and exchange pleasantries. I will have to go out to observe training soon, so could you please get to the point?”

“You know that I was in Tainu until recently. Why do you think I went there?”

“I told you to get to the point. I don’t like riddles.”

“I went there to find a way to stop my father. And I found it.”

Theorado’s eyes had narrowed slightly at Pruelle’s response.

“…I thought you went to meet Baron Willhem, but was it Duke Peletta?”

“I think you know that the distrust towards my father within the family is growing. I won’t deny that I considered it a problem unrelated to me until now, but not anymore.”

After finishing his words, Pruelle had maintained silence just long enough to let out a breath. Creating the right atmosphere was essential when conveying something important.

“Do you know about my father’s ongoing investment in the Western trade business?”

“…”

“You seem to know to some extent. Then did you also know about the charity party and ‘auction’ that will soon be held in Tainu under Baron Willhem’s leadership?”

“…”

“Do you know that those in the Sun Palace have already grasped this fact?”

Theorado’s eyes, which had been narrowing little by little, had hesitated for the first time.

As Pruelle’s eyes softened, Theorado, who had been looking at him like a pebble on the roadside, had changed his posture and sat up straight.

“What do you think is the reason why the Cavalry and Duke Peletta are still there? I saw too much in Tainu, and I’m convinced that my father has crossed the line.”

There was a lot implied in the phrase “crossed the line.” And Theorado had understood all of it.

“Don’t forget that the tragedy of the Apeto family was just a few months ago. If you try to bury it or leave my father alone knowing this, the result will be no different from Apeto… No, a storm greater than that will engulf everyone.”

His voice had sounded calm but all the more chilling like a warning.

Theorado had kept silent and then quietly asked.

“…If what you say is true and His Majesty knows everything, you don’t think I would report this to the Duke?”

“It would already be too late when you report. And I also know that you won’t.”

“How?”

To the sharply uttered question, Pruelle had twisted the corner of his lips without a sound.

“Because you know that for you, the sword is more important than family or father, and the Imperial Knights are more important than anything.”

Theorado Van Tain had closed his mouth. He had felt a slight surprise at the fact that the young prince, who he had never shown interest in, had suddenly stood before him with such a face.

“I met many people in the family after returning to the capital. Meeting with you today was, in fact, the last in line after all other meetings were done.”

Pruelle slowly recited the names of those he had met over time.

Among them were names of those who had suddenly been robbed of the rights they had originally possessed due to the order of the Duke of Tain, but most of them were people who, like Theorado, had taken a relatively indifferent attitude to the affairs of their family. Even though they knew the Duke of Tain was overly involved in trade investments, they were also people who thought it didn’t matter as long as their own business was not affected, even if the southern merchants were outraged that their rights were being encroached upon.

“Did everyone agree with your opinion?”

“Most agree that the family must be maintained well in order for us to enjoy and protect what is precious to us. Isn’t it the best time to think again whether a leader who misuses the family’s power without fulfilling their responsibilities is really needed by us?”

Theorado, who had inherited the blood of the Tain family more deeply than anyone else, could not argue with that statement.

The reason he had somewhat reluctantly followed the Duke of Tain’s requests or complied with them thus far was because he recognized that he needed to fulfill at least a minimal duty and responsibility to help the head of the family to maintain it.

However, if the Duke of Tain had crossed the line without his knowledge, it had turned into a problem that could not be ignored as before. According to Pruelle, it was because of the things he wanted to protect.

What was the reason the once-proud Apeto Ducal House had closed its doors in disgrace and entered financial rehabilitation in the blink of an eye? It was because they could no longer hide the unforgivable sins that had been committed within the family for a long time.

So how had those sins been exposed to the world?

It was undoubtedly deeply involved with the silent will of the Emperor and the hand of the Duke of Peletta, who had carried it out.

They, who had seemed to have no power left after the crown prince’s appointment, had moved a character within the Apeto family who had never been considered important, the 3rd son, and finished everything in the blink of an eye. The corrected Duke Apeto was lying down waiting for death, and his lost position had passed to the ailing 1st son.

As if he knew exactly what Theorado was thinking, Pruelle smiled cunningly beyond his blood-red eyes.

“Even if it’s not me, His Majesty the Emperor will soon put you at the crossroads of choice. Ignorance won’t be an excuse. But if you take my hand now, I will tell you everything I have seen and heard there.”

Theorado recalled the conversation he had with the Duke of Tain. The Duke had shown no particular reaction to the news that his son Pruelle had suddenly gone to Tainu, considering it less important than his trade business.

But perhaps Pruelle had calculated even that, making contact with Duke Peletta, who was like the Emperor’s aide, collecting all the evidence against the Duke of Tain, and returning. Victory’s confidence, never seen before, was read in his confident attitude.

Since when had that child started making contact with the Emperor’s side? Many thoughts flowed through Theorado’s head in an instant. He guessed that the meeting in Tainu was not the first time.

‘When did His Majesty the Emperor and Duke Peletta start watching the Tain family and the Duke?’

Foolishly thinking that the Emperor, through this western monster subjugation, was merely trying to empower the Cavalry, Pruelle clearly told Theorado that his father, too, could follow the path of Duke Apeto.

Unlike the Imperial Knights of long ago, who moved like the Emperor’s limbs and devoted their lives to serving the imperial family, the current Imperial Knights were a distortion, with their average ability degraded. They no longer wholeheartedly devoted their bodies and minds to the Emperor and the imperial family. That role had long been handed over to other groups.

But Theorado had experience helping and learning the sword under the same master as the imperial princes in his childhood.

He was one of those who knew best how sharp the Emperor's teeth and claws truly were, residing in the Sun Palace, how talented his brother, Duke Peletta, was with the sword, and that he was someone never to be taken lightly.

And he knew well that it was precisely for that reason he had been appointed as the Commander of the Imperial Knights.

'Even though I thought I knew… I didn't realize until the sword's tip was right before my eyes.'

Who could have foreseen that a slight annoyance caused by the greed of Duke Tain in the trading business would come back like this, snowballing into something more significant? Theorado stared quietly at Pruelle, who was looking at him with a sharp smile like a sword, and opened his mouth.

"…Fine. Let's cooperate."

"You've made a wise decision."

"So, what are you going to do after you get me? Will you become the next Duke of Tain?"

"No."

Pruelle's face was unflappably calm as he answered shortly.

"The next Duke of Tain will be Priscilla. I will not take that position."

"Then?"

At that question, strangely, Pruelle's tension-filled smile softened slightly for the first time.

“I will go somewhere else. To a place where I can safely protect what I want to protect.”

It was an incomprehensible statement, but Theorado decided not to think too deeply about it. After all, what mattered now was what had to be done next.

He rose from his seat and looked down at Pruelle with indifferent eyes.

“Alright. Tell me what I need to do from now on.”

…

Yuder spotted the security forces not far away and put more strength into his wind-stepping movement.

“Yuder!”

Ever, who was standing by the open window, called his name and beckoned him.

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Chapter 411

Yuder stepped on the deserted western wall, leaped high, and by stepping on the wind once more, he successfully slid into the targeted location. Ever, who witnessed Yuder infiltrating the corridor of the second floor through the window in an instant, expressed pure admiration, her eyes filled with excitement.

“Wow. It was too fast to even see what was happening. Did you happen to have experience as a Night Guest before joining the Cavalry?”

He knew it was a joke, but Yuder had indeed honed his infiltration skills through countless assassination missions, virtually indistinguishable from a Night Guest. Hence, Yuder kept silent. Unaware of the meaning behind the silence, Ever smiled brightly and led the way forward.

“I can see that you’re using your strength, so now I feel Yuder has really recovered. No problems along the way?”

“None.”

“Everyone’s waiting, so let’s go. Ah, and I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Kanna is here right now…”

“I heard it from Finn.”

“I see. Then I guess I don’t have to explain why she’s here.”

Ever continued to speak, answering cleanly.

“It’s an unexpected return, but isn’t this an opportunity for us? I think it would be good for Kanna to participate in today’s mission…

But I feel a little bad for assigning work to someone who just returned. …What do you think, Yuder?”

Yuder faintly lifted the corners of his lips, his careful violet eyes directed at Ever.

“When I heard that Kanna had returned, I actually intended to say that first.”

At Yuder’s response, Ever’s expression brightened in an instant.

“Right? Actually, I already explained the details of today’s mission to Kanna. Since Yuder approves, there will be no problem! Lucky!”

Indeed, it was fortunate that they didn’t have to waste time re-explaining everything to Kanna. It was also exhilarating to see that Ever’s judgment and leadership had greatly improved based on her experiences in the West.

Yuder, without hiding the laughter in his eyes, slightly rolled his pupils towards Ever, who was walking proudly. In his previous life, he had often walked side by side with Ever, discussing matters related to the Cavalry. Back then, they were Commander and Deputy Commander, and they never shared a laugh, but now, even with an important mission ahead, they both could converse in a light mood. It suddenly felt strange.

Even though he had looked at Ever’s back for a long time, it felt unfamiliar.

He gathered that odd sensation and let out a long breath. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling, but now wasn’t the time to get lost in such sentiments.

“We’re here, let’s go in.”

Ever opened the door to the Cavalry's headquarters located within the security management team. The eyes of the familiar people gathered inside immediately turned to them.

"Yuder's here!"

Among the various welcoming faces, Yuder found Kanna, whom he hadn't seen for a long time. Kanna, wearing ordinary clothes instead of her uniform, opened her arms in surprise and emotion towards him.

"Yuder! Your eyes are really healed! Oh my! It's such a relief. Gakane and Jimmy should have seen this…"

Yuder bent down to embrace her. Warm yet spicy hands patted his back a few times before withdrawing. Hearing that the letter announcing her return had arrived late at the mansion due to a mix-up with the courier, she was furious, as she had already had much to say about that matter, to begin with.

"No matter how late the letter arrived after me, I showed the person guarding the main gate the mark of a Cavalry member, but then that person turned me away, saying it was unbelievable that there was no one to meet me. Then when I asked him to contact the inside on my behalf, he said he was too busy to do so. Reading the information through my power, I realized they just wanted to feed me to the wolves."

Through contact with the Tainu Knight guarding the main gate, Kanna discerned his ill intentions and, according to his wishes, neither cried nor got angry. She left with only the words, "We'll see about this later," turning her carriage coldly towards the security management team. Ever praised her after hearing her story, saying, "Well done."

"People from Baron Willhem's side are all like that. Yuder has even been to prison. Still, I thought it had gotten better since then…"

“When today’s work is over, I’ll make him pay several times over. Just wait a little. I’ll make sure he can thoroughly check the guests who come in, hanging upside down on the door.”

At Yuder’s icy reply, the members who had been comforting Kanna all fell silent at once.

A moment later, a smile sharing suspicious intentions floated over the faces of all the members.

“Yes, this is exactly the quality that our Cavalry takes pride in.”

“Indeed, a fitting response for the spirit of the Cavalry.”

The qualities the Cavalry takes pride in? The spirit of the cavalry?…

Yuder frowned at these unfamiliar words, the meaning and origin of which he could not guess, when suddenly the door burst open and Emun Philang rushed in.

“Get ready everyone! Suspicious characters have appeared near the prison back gate, and the smell of the fruit has grown stronger in the prison area. It seems like the Baron is coming out!… Uh, what were you doing?”

Everyone bustled and laughed at his bewildered look as he turned to Yuder and Kanna.

‘The strong smell of the fruit means that the accomplice who was trapped in prison has finally come out. In the case of Baron Willhem, his role will only be to remove them from prison and hand them over to those who will transport them, so there’s a high chance that merchants from the southern country are here.’

Yuder declared briefly, looking at the members who had turned their black hoods over their simple uniforms.

“Let’s go.”

The members moved efficiently, dividing into several groups. Some went to the top of a building where the landscape could be seen in the open, some went inside the security management team, some went to the entrance, and along with Yuder, Emun, Kanna, Ever, and a member named Gilbert with a keen sense of smell, headed towards the most dangerous underground prison. Emun, who showed off his ability to hide in the dark to his colleagues, led them towards the shadow between the buildings.

The entrance to the underground prison was unusually quiet, with no people around, as Baron Willhem had moved most of the security personnel to the bustling inner city for today’s party and auction.

He probably thought that both the Cavalry and the Peletta Knights had left the area without suspicion, but in reality, many who were targeting him were lurking around like predators.

“Look there. The carriages parked at the back gate. Can you see? I looked as closely as I could with my ability, and there are guys in all black inside, waiting for something.”

“It’s a cargo carriage. They plan to transport the people taken from the prison like real cargo. They call people ‘horses,’ but this is even worse than treating them like horses.”

Ever sharply criticized, looking towards the darkness.

“There, the smell of the fruit is almost upon us. They’ll be out soon.”

Gilbert, who had been gently pressing his face against a wall near the entrance, murmured quietly.

“Understood. When the people come out, tell me which one smells of fruit and then immediately head back to the building. Ever,

please also confirm if that person is the one you met.”

“Mm.”

“Understood.”

At Yuder’s command, Gilbert and Ever nodded their heads.

Just as he said, shortly after, the door opened, and a figure wearing a reversed black cloak revealed himself. Following him, a servant gripping the end of a rope, and people whose hands and necks were tightly bound like fish, staggered and stumbled out.

Although they had heard that one could miraculously neither eat nor drink while sleeping in the prison, the bodies of those who had emerged were so emaciated that their bones were showing. Their terrified faces were so paralyzed that they looked like corpses. Gags had been forced into their mouths to keep them from screaming, and whether to make escape more difficult or not, they were not even given shoes. It was a chilly day, and they were only dressed in a single layer.

Upon seeing their pitiful state, flames of anger burst forth from the eyes of all the Cavalries.

With a face colder than the winter wind, Yuder watched them and gestured to Gilbert. Understanding his meaning, Gilbert slowly raised his hand to point at someone. Ever followed with a slight nod of her head.

Among those bound, a man with milky-colored hair standing at the very end was the ally of the Cavalry who had swallowed the fruit. He looked around, trembling as if searching for someone.

While Yuder was watching him, people also descended from the black carriage and approached those who were tied. Apparently to

verify each other’s faces, those standing at the very front took off their hats one by one.

The one standing in front of the bound people was, of course, Baron Willhem, and facing him was the southern merchant they had fought with in the underground warehouse before.

“…That one. The one who fought against me and the Commander before. He fights by emitting a force similar to a sword, so be careful in close combat. He’s also skilled in sensing presence, so be cautious.”

He whispered so softly it was almost inaudible, but even that worried him in case the southern merchant would notice. The members exhaled softly as if holding their breath and nodded their heads.

“Now, all 37 are here, so check them and load them up. You did properly store all the goods from the warehouse, right?”

“Yes.”

“Go together and check, and do not wander about until the appointed time. You never know when those madmen might break in again, so you must guard thoroughly until the auction is over. If something goes wrong, not even sacrificing all your necks will wash away His Grace the Duke’s wrath, so don’t forget that!”

“…”

Silently listening to Baron Willhem’s tirade, the southern merchant suddenly turned his head slightly. Yuder saw his gaze faintly directed towards the security management team and felt a subtle prickling sensation.

“Why are you just standing there? Don’t waste time, move now!”

“…”

At that moment, conveniently, Baron Willhem’s shout turned the southern merchant’s gaze back to where it had been.

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Chapter 412

‘I thought I noticed something… fortunately not.’

When Baron Willhem was to bring out the victims, the Cavalry members inside the security management team had arranged to signal the accomplices at the opportune moment. It seemed like they were about to start, so it was fortunate that they were not discovered even before they tried.

A moment later, a sharper wind blew in from the direction of the security management unit. The trees shook in unison, and the people tied in their single robes shivered, but only the accomplice with the dark hair in the back subtly raised his head, his shoulders rigid.

‘The signal was transmitted properly.’

He felt satisfaction in using a method similar to the one he’d used when he requested rescue. Yuder saw a sense of tension and resolute will fill the eyes of the accomplice, who had previously been paralyzed with fear.

“I’m freezing to death.”

As Baron Willhem cursed and waved his hand, the servant who was holding the end of the leashes of the bound people moved hastily toward the carriage. The people tied together with knots that would strangle them if they did not move in unison followed, stumbling, their suppressed groans escaping.

And then it happened.

The accomplice at the very back suddenly stumbled and fell.

The others, all tied together, tangled and fell in succession, and the surroundings turned into chaos in an instant.

“You fools, can’t you do one thing properly? Cut their leashes and stand them up now! They can’t die yet!”

If the precious 37 ‘horses’ brought here were damaged in the end, all their previous efforts would go to waste. While the servants and the southern merchant who led them hurried to unfasten the leashes, Baron Willhem was distant, furious as a madman.

Yuder confirmed that the attention of the rest of the people, who were guarding the carriage, was entirely drawn to that scene and stood up.

“Now!”

Just as he was about to raise his hand to signal to attack,

Boom! Flames shot up from the direction of the carriage, and screams were heard.

“Ugh!”

“Huek!”

Several people who had been guarding the carriage suddenly turned on their comrades and ignited a fire. Those who were ambushed from behind fell to the ground without a chance to fight back. Blood sprayed instantly, staining the carriage and the ground, and Baron Willhem’s horrified scream was heard.

“Who are you!”

“Those who have long awaited seeing you in person.”

Emerging from the darkness as if unveiling a veil were a man with a face full of burn scars, and his familiar accomplices.

‘Nahan, Hosanna, and Ershi. I’m not sure about one, but… he must be the one who just set off the flames.’

Considering how the flames always existed when the Star of Nagran made noise in Tainu, it seemed likely to be his doing. Though he seemed to gasp for breath, having shot multiple flames in an instant, it was enough power to make others cower.

‘I knew they would appear, but not now. When did they get mixed in with them?’

Swiftly turning his head, Yuder saw the southern merchant he had fought, his expression extremely cold. It looked certain that Nahan had not hidden with mutual consent.

Meanwhile, Ershi, who had taken down all those guarding the carriage in an instant, roughly wiped the blood off her hands, her breath ragged. Madness and hatred overflowed from the eyes of one who had finally faced the true object of revenge.

“Baron Willhem…”

Facing that look as if she had waited for this moment alone, Baron Willhem retreated, swallowing a breathless gasp, feeling as if the fangs of a great beast were sinking into his throat.

“You’re the madmen who caused the explosions in Tainu! I heard you had fled…!”

“Fled? We’ve never run away from here. We’ve just been waiting for the right moment.”

Nahan, who was by Ershi’s side, replied with a low chuckle.

“Now is the time to face the punishment for the sins you’ve committed. In passing, we must also save our brethren.”

“What…?”

The Baron, who had heard the additional words, opened his mouth in disbelief, then quickly composed himself. He yelled at the southern merchant who had been quietly observing the situation.

“What are you doing? Hurry up and deal with them!”

“A useless fellow who can do nothing but give orders.”

As he spoke, Ershi swung her arm. An invisible energy that surrounded her arm flashed, and simultaneously, the southern merchant who had fought Yuder drew his sword and struck at thin air. Unbelievably, there was a sound as if it had hit something unseen, followed by an explosion and a cloud of dust.

After several exchanges in the blink of an eye, the southern man and Ershi reached a temporary standstill. As the others also drew their weapons, Ershi reluctantly retreated, grinding her teeth.

‘Was he holding back his abilities and only fighting Ershi with a sword because of the Baron’s presence?’

But conversely, if he was only using a sword to face Ershi, this meant that his skill was considerable.

“Why have you stopped? Kill them right away!”

Baron Willhem, fumed from behind, but the standoff did not easily resolve. Shortly after, the southern merchant, who had been glancing at Ershi, Nahan, and Hosanna, opened his mouth with a furrowed brow.

“You are the Awakeners who have infiltrated various parts of Tainu?”

“Why? Don’t you believe us?”

“You all can’t be here. Where have you sent the rest? Have those stronger than you already gone to the auction house?”

Yuder realized what the man was looking for as he surveyed their surroundings. He was searching for the traces of Kishiar and Yuder, with whom he had fought in the darkness.

“If you want to know, find out for yourself, you dogs of others.”

The fire-wielding ability user who was with Ershi laughed loudly, flames rising from his hand.

“Of course, you won’t be able to know!”

Though they were talking past each other, the conversation strangely made sense.

The misunderstanding between the southern merchant who mistakenly considered Kishiar and Yuder as members of the Star of Nagran, and Nahan’s side who didn’t know that such an event had occurred, matched perfectly.

‘As the merchant said, not all of those people are here, so the chances are high that they have hidden the rest of their comrades at the auction house.’

Yuder had anticipated this as well.

In the meantime, the southern merchant, who had already assured that the powerful Awakeners he had met in the warehouse had moved towards the auction house, sheathed his sword and raised his voice to those with him.

“Handle them on your own. I’m moving right now.”

“What? You rascal. Where are you going without protecting me!”

“Who said I was going to let you go?”

Both Willhem and the fire ability user yelled at the same time, but the southern merchant turned away without concern. To stop him, Ershi and the fire wielder stepped forward, and in opposition, the merchant's allies brandished their weapons.

At that very moment, when the precarious atmosphere had broken and everything seemed ready to explode into chaos, Yuder finally raised his stopped hand, sending the signal to attack.

"Who's there! How dare you invade the Tainu Security Management Team? Stop at once!"

With a thunderous sound from above the Security Management Team building, a massive spear made of earth plunged down, followed by arrows of light and lumps of fire and water being relentlessly shot down. These separated the factions of Nahan, Baron Willhem, and the abandoned victims of human trafficking.

"Th-the Cavalry?!"

Dodging breaking wood, Baron Willhem exclaimed with a startled face.

"Why is the Cavalry here…?!"

"Ershi! We can't go there!"

"Having come this far, you want us to run again? Stop this madness!"

Seizing the moment, Ershi tried to charge at the Baron, shouting, only to be momentarily halted by her fire-breathing comrade.

Amidst the swirling dust and the sounds of explosions, Yuder and his companions, with their faces hidden beneath deeply drawn hoods, sprinted forward in unison.

“Are you all right?”

Without hesitation, Emun, Kanna, and Ever rushed towards the closest fallen victims of human trafficking, wielding their daggers to cut their binds.

“The Cavalry is here. Do not be afraid!”

“Y-you really came to save us…”

A brown-haired accomplice, his face streaked with tears, mumbled upon spotting Ever.

“Thank you… for saving us…”

Ever silently gripped his hand. Nearby, Kanna was busy helping people to their feet and patting their backs to bring them to their senses.

“Can you stand? Good. Don’t be afraid, go straight into that building! The people inside will protect you.”

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Even after being released, Emun gathered those who could not move properly and, cloaked in darkness, moved toward the security management team building. Meanwhile, Cavalry members were incessantly pouring down various elemental attacks from the top of the building.

Amidst the chaos of crumbling walls, overturned carts, and twisted roads, Yuder advanced forward, avoiding obstacles with the minimum movement necessary. Through the thick dust, he spotted the fallen Baron Willhem and Ershi, who was attacking him.

Neither Nahan nor any other comrades were visible beside her. Near the Baron, a servant who had followed him lay flailing, already transformed into a corpse. It was the same method as what happened to his brother and sister-in-law, who had been murdered in the basement of his mansion.

The Baron, forgetting even his dignity, frantically dodged attacks on the ground. His clothes and body were filled with wounds, making him look no different from a hunted beast.

“Wh-where is everyone? The assassin wants to kill me, ah!”

“Die!”

“Aaaaagh!”

Baron Willhem screamed, covering his face with his hands. But the death he expected did not come.

Yuder locked eyes with Ershi, holding a sword that had blocked her attacking hand. The strong shock traveled up his palm, tingling

so intensely that it was unbelievable that it came from a clash between a bare hand and a sword.

“Ca, val, ry.”

She seemed not to recognize that the hooded man was someone that she knew, though, given her crazed appearance, it was doubtful she would recognize him even if he revealed his face.

‘She’s completely lost her mind.’

“If you stop me, you, too, will die…!”

She raised her other hand and struck down, as if enraged. Yuder narrowly dodged her charging body and fended off the attack aimed at him and Baron Willhem.

Only then did the Baron open his eyes, realizing that he had not died, and grasp the situation. Whether the one who was defending him was Cavalry or not was no longer important. What mattered was surviving.

“Sa-save me! I’m a noble. She’s trying to assassinate a noble!”

Naturally, his cry did not help Yuder at all. It only made the angry Ershi stronger. Yuder frowned as he noticed her attacks getting stronger with every deflection.

‘It looks like she might go berserk.’

A powerful Awakener individual, caught up in intense emotions, would often become much stronger in specific situations than usual. Although the attacks might become simpler as excitement grew, it was still not difficult to defend against them.

However, the problem was that the amount of power one could draw was not infinite.

In his previous life, Yuder had seen countless times when Awakeners, drawing power rapidly in the face of death, went berserk and died. If lucky, they survived, and their abilities skyrocketed, but that was truly a matter of luck.

And Ershi seemed to be entering that stage right now.

Facing a berserk Awakener was as difficult as stopping a storm with one's bare body. As he pondered whether to abandon his plan of restraining her with minimal force, reinforcements suddenly appeared from behind.

"You're here!"

From the dust, Ever appeared, followed by Emun and Kanna. Seeing the enemy numbers increase, Ershi seemed to decide that continuing a one-on-one fight was disadvantageous and retreated, but her growl of hatred did not cease. Yuder approached his comrades and whispered softly,

"Her power is extraordinary. She might go berserk, so be careful."

"Runaway magic?"

"When power is exerted excessively, in some cases, it leads to progress, but in others, it does the opposite. …I have seen it before."

"Even before joining the cavalry, you met another Awakener; you really seem to know everything."

In the midst of Emun's astonishment, Baron Willhem, who had crawled to their side, screamed angrily.

"What are you doing without saving me? Do you know who I am?"

"Who are you?"

As Kanna retorted, Baron Willhem was momentarily lost for words.

“I, I am…”

“Hand him over to me!”

Ershi spoke, her breath rasping.

“All I want is his life. If you hand him over, I promise I will do no more. Isn’t it better than fighting among fellow Awakener brothers and sisters?”

Kanna, who had been eyeing Ershi carefully, shook her head.

“I can tell without using my abilities. You’re lying.”

“…Yes. That person is already consumed by hatred and doesn’t care about anything else.”

Ever also looked at Ershi with the same expression.

Ershi had horrifically killed numerous people, displaying her hatred. The damage inflicted on the Cavalry or other unrelated people didn’t matter to her.

Her anger had already surpassed a limit that could be quenched by others’ deaths. Even if she killed Baron Willhem, the true culprit, here, her revenge would not end, and she could never escape the hatred that had engulfed her.

Looking at her, seemingly unaffected by the fact that her body and abilities were succumbing to her emotions, Ever suddenly exhaled and spoke.

“Before coming here, I checked, and all the other southern merchants who fought you, except that person, have already left this

place. Most of the others have been mostly subdued, but… they managed to escape our attacks.”

It was clear where they had gone: their final destination, the auction house, brazenly located near the Security Management Team.

“Probably, she won’t leave here before killing the Baron. Whether it’s a rampage or whatever, you don’t have time to stick around here. Go ahead with Kanna; I’ll handle her.”

“Sister.”

Kanna turned her head in surprise, but Ever calmly adjusted her gloves.

“She seems to have abilities similar to mine, so it won’t be difficult to face her, and soon, the remaining colleagues inside the security management team will come out. Emun can hide the Baron, so there’s no problem.”

“…”

Many of the members on standby in the Security Management Team would have already moved toward the auction house when Yuder’s signal dropped. They needed to go to them as soon as possible.

But could Ever, who had no experience facing a rampaging Awakener, handle it alone?

Although Yuder didn’t think that Ever would be pushed by Ershi, variables could emerge from anywhere.

Ever, seeming to recognize the meaning in Yuder’s silence, chuckled and patted Yuder’s shoulder.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Have you forgotten our dawn training together? You praised me for controlling my power well; was that all a lie?”

“No.”

“I’ll follow wherever you put me, so don’t worry too much. As the Shin Division Deputy Commander, I have no intention of losing to someone like her.”

Yuder remained silent for a moment and then nodded.

“Understood. Come as soon as you’re done.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve used my strength properly.”

“Ever, hadn’t you used your real strength against the people we’ve just beaten?”

Emun’s trembling voice asked the question, but Ever didn’t respond. Instead, she just pointed towards Baron Willhem. The Baron’s eyes met Ever’s, and he retreated with a terrified expression.

“What, what are you going to do? You scoundrels. Don’t you dare lay a hand on me!”

“What are you planning to do with that man!”

As Ershi yelled and rushed in, Ever’s fists clenched together and her foot struck the ground like an explosion. The moment the two hands collided, a massive pressure erupted with a sound like steel clashing against steel.

Yuder seized the opportunity and quickly signaled to Kanna.

“Let’s go.”

Kanna also firmly closed her lips and nodded.

“Get on my back quickly. We have to move fast.”

“What? Uh, wow!”

Kanna let out a small scream as Yuder jumped, carrying her on his back.

“Ah. It’s too high!”

“I’m sorry.”

Yuder was accustomed to the sensation of falling and jumping again at this height, but Kanna was not. After he apologized, she made a few sounds of annoyance before tightly gripping Yuder’s shoulder and clinging to him.

“It’s, it’s fine. It’s urgent now, so you can go faster! Let’s go!”

“…”

“Oh right. But where’s the auction house? All around here looks like mysterious mansions.”

“According to the information from those who attended the auction last year, one of those mansions has been remodeled into an auction house… So we just need to go a little further.”

Yuder answered while leaping from the roof of a building onto the roof of another.

“Ah, is it over there? I hear some noise…”

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Just as Kanna had said, Yuder's destination was at the place where a noisy sound was coming from.

Located on a secluded hill slightly away from the other mansions, there stood a rare and antiquated mansion. There was a disturbance in front of the main gate at the junction leading to that place.

"What do you mean by I can't enter!"

"I'm sorry, but all the invitations for the guests attending the Tainu Merchant Joint Auction today have already been sent out. If you don't have an invitation, you cannot enter."

"But, I had it when I left home, but I lost it, don't you understand?"

"We can't do anything about it. To prevent any unpleasant incidents, if you don't have an invitation, you can't enter no matter what happens…"

"How can it be that I, who came last year, cannot enter! Can't you see beyond just selling a few items? Do you not know how well-acquainted I am with Baron Willhem? Bring the person in charge at once!"

A nobleman, who had been denied entry to the auction, was quarreling with the guards at the door. He was furious that he couldn't enter because he had lost his invitation, but the guards firmly stopped him.

'Baron Willhem holds an auction here, and it seems he is making a great fuss all over the Empire.'

Everyone must have known who was holding the auction, but officially, not only Duke Tain but also Baron Willhem himself had nothing to do with the auction.

“I’m sorry, but please leave. If you continue to cause a scene…”

“Is the Baron not here? If I see him, the problem will be solved! Then I will not leave you guys alone.”

“…”

A troubled and fearful expression spread across the soldiers’ faces. They were just doing their job, and they didn’t want to get into trouble with the nobleman, so there was nothing they could do.

Finally, the quarreling nobleman forcefully moved his carriage up, and the soldiers ran after him. Thanks to this, the main gate was left completely empty.

“Yuder. Should we not go over there?”

“I’ve heard that protection magic has been cast all around, except for the paths accessible by carriage. We have to go to another door to join up with the other members.”

In the mansion where the auction was being held, there was one secret entrance that neither guests nor workers knew about. Finding that was the biggest gain Pruelle got while digging for information.

“A little reading of the information and then leaving?”

That seemed fine. Yuder silently landed in front of the empty main gate. Kanna, who had alighted from his back, quickly touched the gate’s carvings and walls without wasting time.

“Hmm. I read a lot of thoughts and information from the people who passed through this door. There must have been many intense

things happening.”

While Kanna was closing her eyes and focusing on reading the information, Yuder kept watch around. Seeing the row of carriages parked near the distant buildings, it seemed that many guests had already arrived.

‘I’m not sure if it will start as scheduled without Baron Willhem coming.’

Neither the southern merchant who had come before them nor Nahan were to be seen. The southern merchant who was supposed to move the goods clearly had an obvious task. Since things had gone awry, he must have been thinking of taking the goods out right away.

‘Since we already know who is involved, it’s not urgent even if we miss them.’

Yuder recalled the information found in a note from Finn Eldore, which he had inspected and incinerated after his visit to the security management team. Finn had dismissed the information as trivial, but Yuder realized that it might be useful later on, not just right now.

”*While they were outside the inn, I took a quick look around their room using my abilities. Most of their belongings were ordinary, but there was one item with this symbol drawn on it. It’s hard to describe, so I’ll draw it*.”

A comet, the horizon, and a sword that cut above it - all formed by a few simple lines.

It was the symbol of the largest tribe in the south, a tribe that had extensive interactions with the countries north of the desert, including the Orr Empire, in his previous life.

“I’ll have to find out more about this as soon as this matter is settled.”

Unlike the move of the southern merchant, where they were clear about what was behind him, it was difficult to guess in detail how the Nahan would move in the current situation.

‘But it probably won’t be much different from what I originally expected. Even without Ershi, the standpoint of avenging on behalf of her will not have changed.’

“Nahan, that person. Today was the first time I saw him properly, and I didn’t think he would abandon his comrades again like that,” Kanna murmured quietly, exuding a mirage-like energy from her hand as she read the information.

“He abandoned the comrades who came to help him like Gayle and Doyle, and now he’s left behind the comrade who said he would help with the revenge. Could he really just abandon this task and run away again with the remaining comrades?”

“No.”

Yuder answered with conviction.

“He will continue Ershi’s revenge even without Ershi.”

“I can’t understand. What is the meaning of someone else continuing a revenge when the person needing revenge is gone?”

“Just think of him as someone who sees that as the purpose itself.”

It was not surprising that Ershi, who had insisted on killing Baron Willhem despite the resistance from the Cavalry, was left behind.

Hadn’t he seen several times that Nahan was someone who could easily abandon comrades and minor objectives, prioritizing his own standards and safety? Gayle and Doyle had been discarded like that, and now it was Ershi’s turn.

This incident, announced as helping Ershi’s revenge, would not be very different for him.

In the end, what mattered to Nahan was not ‘Ershi’s’ revenge, but the ‘revenge’ of Ershi.

He would gather comrades by mobilizing them for the cause of doing what he wanted to do as someone else’s request, and inflame their hatred. Even if Ershi died here, it would not be Nahan’s responsibility but the responsibility of the Cavalry, and the remaining comrades would become even more loyal to Nahan. Truly a wicked man.

And yet he believed what he was doing was right. He was truly an unpleasant madman.

“They were not comrades, they were just means to an end.”

Kanna also seemed to have the same thought.

“Why does the ‘sage’ that Gayle and Doyle believed in keep condoning Nahan? Does he know that Nahan completely ruined the village of the Awakener in Great Sarain Forest?”

“The possibility that what we thought was moderation was just a mask. It’s common for a leader who plays a good role externally to secretly assign subordinates to do things contrary to his position to keep opposing opinions under control.”

Yuder spoke, recalling Emperor Katchian.

At that moment, Kanna, who had been continually using her abilities around them, suddenly looked at Yuder with a strange expression.

“Wow, Yuder. You just sounded a little like Commander.”

“….I was?”

At that unexpected remark, all focus was shattered.

“I mean…… No, anyway, it seems I’ve read everything we need to, so let’s go.”

Carrying Kanna again and heading towards the secret entrance, Yuder reflected anew on how incredibly powerful Hosanna’s teleportation ability was, especially when combined with Nahan.

Even without specializing in teleportation ability, just using Finn Eldore’s ability made escaping unnoticed from a mansion as easy as pie. Especially when it came to Hosanna, who could transport multiple people, including himself, over long distances at the same time. The fact that they hadn’t yet captured Nahan was half due to his presence.

“The soldiers we saw just now were anxious because Baron Willhem hadn’t arrived yet. And… I think I also read a little information related to those associated with Nahan.”

Kanna, riding on Yuder’s back, briefly mentioned the information she had gathered.

“People related to Nahan?”

“There were changes among the workers who entered here this morning. Some new people joined in place of the ones who were originally supposed to come. A soldier was angry about it, but… he

later thought he had seen wrong and let them pass. Isn't that strange?"

"It must be an illusion ability."

"If not that, it would be inexplicable. The perception was unnatural."

"You're amazing, Kanna."

As Yuder sincerely praised her, Kanna smiled in pleasure.

"I wasn't just playing around in the Great Sarain Forest!"

At that moment, the entrance to the secret passage revealed itself. The two approached quietly, opened the door, and entered. It wasn't long before they saw the familiar faces of the Cavalry members who had gathered.

"Yuder, we were worried you were late. And Kanna's with you."

"Was there anything else on your way here?"

"No. We came right here as soon as you signaled."

Among the members were other colleagues who had been there since morning. Specifically, Robel, the Awakener from the Star of Nagran.

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Chapter 415

“I was waiting.”

Robel, who had successfully infiltrated the auction house through a similar route to Marty, was dressed as a servant working there. He smirked cynically, saying that his experience of having snuck into Baron Willhem’s mansion and having worked as a servant had helped him a lot today, and then began to explain the inside information he had seen, one by one.

“Today’s auction is divided into three parts, depending on the types of goods exhibited. Most of the guests were looking forward to the last third. I heard that they were expecting valuable magic tools and ‘horses’ and that a few might be released here… But since you all have come here, it will surely end in vain hopes.”

It seemed that Baron Willhem had planned to sell some of the human trafficking victims here first. However, there would be no place for the human trafficking victims, who were insultingly referred to by the code word ‘horses’, here today. Baron Willhem, the person in charge of the auction, was no different. A cold smile appeared on Yuder’s face, and the Cavalry members, who seemed to have the same thought, followed suit with laughter.

“Most of the guests have already arrived, and I have confirmed the faces and locations of the top officials who were writing the names of the visitors. There doesn’t seem to be any other entrance besides what we were informed of in advance.”

“What about the warehouse where the exhibition items are stored?”

“It is connected to the back of the main building and is easy to find. However, the entrance was guarded by the people of the

southern countries, and temporary servants like me couldn't approach. Oh, and… I found some familiar faces among the servants working in different areas."

"People belonging to the Star of Nagran, right?"

When Kanna, who had already grasped the situation using her ability, asked, Robel nodded slightly.

"Yes, that's right. But you seem to be someone I'm meeting for the first time, who are you…?"

"I'm Kanna Wand. The Deputy Commander of Jung Division. I only arrived in Tainu a few hours ago, but I've heard a lot about you. You were originally from there, right?"

A leisurely and confident look flowed from Kanna's face as she briefly introduced herself. Overwhelmed by her aura, Robel opened his mouth again.

"Ah, yes. Anyway, as you said, those hiding here are all Awakeners from the same village as me, those who most actively sympathized with Nahan's will. They have excellent attack abilities, so they alone would be more than enough to break down this place."

Fortunately, Robel had spotted them first and avoided them, so his identity had not been revealed.

"How many did you find?"

Robel, responding to Yuder's question, counted on his fingers and said, "I clearly identified about seven." Since that was not all of Nahan's followers, the rest seemed to have been sent to the party hall.

'Nahan must know that Kishiar and I are at the party hall, so he probably won't move there first… But considering the silence, maybe

not.’

Even so, most of the knights and soldiers were gathered there, and the Cavalry members who were eager to use their strength were guarding with fire in their eyes. Furthermore, Natan Zuckerman and Kishiar were holding out, so there was no concern at all.

Yuder thought of Kishiar’s figure, who had been standing by the window, wearing the formal suit Yuder had taken off. He would still be waiting for Yuder alone there.

After a moment of silence, he told Robel that he had done well, and then opened his mouth to the members.

“As you all know, I cannot stay here till the end. Ever, who was originally supposed to lead, will be a little late, but we cannot delay. As planned, we must block the warehouse and entrance, secure the visitor list, and capture everyone here.”

Dealing with those identified as the awakened southern merchant and the hidden Star of Nagran here would not be easy. Yuder looked at his comrades in front of him, feeling the same way as when he had left Ever first.

“The southern merchant should be in the warehouse now, and although I can’t locate Nahan yet, he might be hiding inside here using his abilities or he might have headed to the party hall. Avoid engaging them one-on-one as much as possible, and in case something unexpected happens… Kanna, I’ll leave it to you.”

“Sure. I just have to take over for Ever until she arrives, right? No problem. Don’t worry, Yuder, just go back to the Commander after you do what you have to do.”

Kanna, who seemed to have read what Yuder wanted to say, drew a circle with her thumb and forefinger. Her appearance was utterly reliable.

Yuder nodded to her.

“…Okay.”

Soon, the team members who had gathered in the underground passage began to move nimbly, leaving Yuder behind. Before finally departing, Yuder hesitated and felt a certain question in Robel’s eyes that he might have wanted to ask from the beginning.

“Um, Sir Yuder, perhaps… before you arrived at the party hall…”

“Marty is performing her role well. I don’t think there’s anything to worry about.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

As he preemptively answered, Robel’s face spread with a mixture of embarrassment, relief, and faint feelings towards Marty.

“Thank you for letting me know. Then I’ll take my leave…”

“Robel.”

Yuder called out his name as he turned to leave. Robel stopped and turned his head.

“I know that you have collaborated with us to regain Marty and seek revenge on Nahan, but today, rather than fighting the Star of Nagran, I would prefer you to help with securing the list.”

“Excuse me? I will certainly guide you there… Oh. You must be worried because my wind ability isn’t that powerful.”

Robel frowned as if he didn’t understand the meaning. Yuder shook his head and spoke softly.

“That’s not what I meant. I see your ability as more specialized in controlling the weight of objects rather than wind. You’ve only

trapped yourself in a limitation by defining that you can only move small objects with wind.”

“…The weight of objects?”

He seemed to half understand. It would be faster for him to experience and feel it himself, so Yuder decided not to explain further.

“Securing the guest list of those attending today might be more important than capturing them. Without it, it’s difficult to properly punish those we capture. So if something unexpected happens, remember this and use your ability correctly.”

Of course, it would be much better if nothing unexpected happened, but it wouldn’t hurt to be prepared.

“Remember, there’s no such thing as a worthless ability.”

“…”

Robel couldn’t easily respond. It seemed he didn’t know how to take the words he had heard. Yuder left him and started to move. With the scheduled time approaching, he needed to move quickly.

Arriving at a secluded corner of the closest garden to the main building after following a different path from his comrades, Yuder saw dozens of magnificent carriages quietly displaying their elegance, waiting for their owners.

Yuder took a deep breath and was balancing the energy within his body when he spotted a carriage that seemed to have just arrived late. He hid behind a tree. It was a common occurrence for someone to be tardy.

“You’re late! The first part has already started. You lazy oaf! If you had properly maintained the carriage wheel earlier, this wouldn’t

have happened!”

“I’m sorry.”

“If someone like you had driven my carriage when I was in the capital, I would have cut off your head by now! Or are you ignoring me because I lost my honor and came all the way down here?”

“No, no sir! How could you say that?”

As those who had come down from the carriage were yelling at the unfortunate coachman, Yuder momentarily paused when he saw their faces.

‘Those people are…?’

He felt he recognized them from somewhere, and soon he remembered.

They were the ones who had stood as representatives for the Apeto family during the trial, pouring all sorts of accusations against Kishiar!

‘What luck, to run into them here of all places.’

During the time of the trial concerning the Apeto family’s crimes, most of the guilty had received just punishment. However, some who were ambiguously involved had escaped the capital secretly to preserve their safety.

And from the way they were speaking, the likelihood seemed very high that these people had also left the capital via a similar path.

After all, it was quite predictable, considering they were chosen by the Apeto family.

‘So they came to a place like this.’

Yuder’s eyes gleamed ominously. Unaware of the hunter-like gaze watching them from afar, they lamented their circumstances as they entered the auction house.

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Yuder had clearly memorized the carriage they had ridden in and dismounted from. After the coachman disappeared with a strained expression, Yuder stepped forward and slowly exhaled.

According to information from Pruelle, the place where the noble carriage that carried the dignitaries had arrived was one of the few areas not equipped with an intrusion attack magic circle. Thanks to the carriages that were treated more preciously than humans, Yuder was given the opportunity to avoid others' eyes and exert his power with ease.

Slowly raising his right hand, energy began to boil up from within his body.

The energy, stronger than usual due to its master's emotions, gradually condensed and raised a light wind beneath his feet. His left eye, covered by a hood, turned into a bright golden color.

Yuder began to execute his biggest goal for coming here, after gathering enough strength.

'The first is the signal.'

Rumble.

The power that burst out from under his feet shook the earth slightly, and the ground around the main building quivered like a minor earthquake. Those who weren't sensitive might not think it strange, but for the scattered Cavalry members around, it was a significant signal.

Yuder coldly stared at the yet silent main building, waiting for the subtle vibrations to completely subside. Then he leaped onto a tall

tree and summoned a much more powerful force.

‘The second is the blockade.’

As the earth’s energy sent out to aid in the blockade spread wider and larger than before, trees in the garden crumbled noiselessly at Yuder’s command, and soil sprang up.

Yuder’s expression remained icy as walls collapsed, closing all escape routes for those inside. His face was unchanged, as if he wasn’t wielding nature at his will.

Then he spotted a few Cavalry members, fumbling in the distance. At Yuder’s touch, the rising earth changed direction, avoiding the members who had nearly been hit. Surprised by the sudden event, the members looked around and waved their arms in thanks, apparently intended for Yuder.

Most of them were indeed excited to witness something akin to the ‘Miracle of Great Sarain Forest’ that they had only heard in rumors, but Yuder, far away, couldn’t see their excitement.

Inside the main building, where all windows were covered, blocking outside light, and guests were oblivious, a wondrous and immense trap was completed in no time by one man’s doing.

Yuder quietly looked down at the spectacle he had created. Sweat beaded on his forehead from exerting such great power, but it wasn’t painful; rather, it was refreshing.

Even with all exits blocked, it wouldn’t stop someone like Hosanna, who possessed teleportation. Still, ordinary people couldn’t escape without sprouting wings.

Yuder simply assessed the result he had created and immediately began to exert the third power.

‘The third is destruction.’

In fact, this was the primary reason he had come here.

The most immense power yet began to stretch out from inside Yuder’s body through his fingertips, making his hair flutter. Nature began to respond to his silent call. Its range precisely matched the size of the wall that tightly surrounded the auction house.

At that moment, everything in nature within sight was in Yuder’s hands. Sensing each one vividly, Yuder once again realized the overwhelming power of his ability.

When he had been unable to use his power, he had thought that it was really fine even without it. Being without power did not make Yuder any less Yuder after all.

But now.

As Kishiar La Orr had commanded, the one who could shake that splendid and corrupt auction house, outwitted those Star of Nagran who had snuck in to ruin the auction house, and let them know that there was no escape for those who should have faced judgment, was none other than himself.

At this fact, Yuder felt a fiercer satisfaction than ever before.

Regaining his power was truly fortunate.

Yuder extended his hand slowly towards the auction house and aimed. His left eye, shining with golden light, looked down chillingly at the places soon to lose their former appearance, before it was soon hidden behind his lowering eyelid.

The conversation he had last shared with Pruelle before he went back to the capital came to Yuder’s mind.

“During the final operation, is it okay to break some buildings or terrain as long as it does not harm the citizens of Tainu?”

“Eh? Why are you asking me that?”

“First of all, since Prince Pruelle is the representative of the family that owns this land and is with us, I am inquiring.”

“What did the Duke of Peletta say?”

“Do as you wish.”

Pruelle seemed momentarily taken aback, but soon burst into loud laughter.

“Alright. Then my answer is the same. It’s such a shame I won’t be able to see that refreshing sight firsthand!”

Kishiar and Pruelle both approved, and they had informed those participating in today’s mission in advance about what they were going to do, so there was no more hesitation.

Yuder opened his eyes again. The powers that had escaped from within him rushed out without restraint at his will. He felt dizzy as all the trapped energy was suddenly pulled out, and his body trembled, but there was no trembling in the fingertips aimed at the auction house.

A smile like a wild beast preparing for a feast appeared over his expressionless face.

And then, all the windows in the auction house exploded at once.

“What, what’s happening?”

Everyone inside the warehouse, from the foreigners hastily moving bags of white powder, the distinguished guests whispering the names of items they could not legally acquire, the senior officials

anxiously waiting for an absent owner, to the shady characters hidden among them waiting for their time to act, all stopped as one.

But they were not given the chance to comprehend what had caused this situation.

Almost immediately, the ground surrounding the auction house began to shake mercilessly, and the sensation of something collapsing began.

The auction house was plunged into chaos. Screams of instinctive terror filled the air, shattering any semblance of calm.

“Ah!”

“Kyaaa!”

The panicked crowd surged towards the exit, pushing and trampling each other. People were knocked down and stepped on, but no one stopped to help them. Expensive wine glasses shattered, and the top-grade carpets were stained. Beautiful sculptures hanging from the ceiling fell and broke into pieces.

But the view that greeted the distinguished guests who had pushed others aside to escape was not the outside world they had expected.

Individuals dressed in black uniforms, faces hidden by ominous cloaks, surrounded them and shouted in thunderous voices.

“We are the Cavalry. From now on, we will seize everyone here in the name of the Emperor and Duke Peletta!”

The chaos that unfolded was abhorrent: some were raging, realizing who they were, others were assessing the situation and fleeing, while others swung their weapons about. But no excuses or attacks could penetrate the defense of those dressed in black. They

demonstrated an unprecedented power, quickly capturing the dignitaries and piling them up like sacks of grain.

Those who had nothing to show except their noble titles or wealth were captured without being able to resist properly. In that hellish landscape, only an endless earthquake continued, shaking everything like divine punishment.

…

“Will Ershi be alright, my lord?”

Hosanna murmured with a heavy face, concealing his face with his hand.

“Even though she stubbornly refused to come… should we have brought her? If she were to die there…”

“She might be caught by the Cavalry members, but she won’t die. You know as well, Hosanna, what they did with Gayle and Doyle.”

Hosanna was silent for a moment. He knew that Nahan’s words were correct, but his heart, filled with guilt, did not easily subside. He felt this way even knowing it was contradictory.

“Ershi simply couldn’t endure any longer. Slitting the Baron’s throat became more important to her than anything else. If we cannot understand her feelings, then who will?”

“…”

“Rather than that, we should focus on what we need to do now. Ershi must be enjoying her sweet revenge by now, so we must do what we must.”

“…Yes.”

Hosanna replied curtly and sighed. They were moving slowly in the deserted garden located between Baron Willhem's main and auxiliary residences, heading towards the back gate they had noted when they had infiltrated before.

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“Nahan!”

Those who had entered by the power of Hosanna, hiding themselves around the mansion, flocked together all at once.

“I heard from Marson. There were Cavalry members in the security management team. Did Duke Tain set a double trap to catch us?”

“Cowardly bastards. It was a good thing that Nahan took only the minimum number of people.”

Marson was one of their comrades, with the ability to spit flames and cause explosions. He had been one of the most proactive in this affair along with Ershi. After the unexpected appearance of the Cavalry, he tried to persuade Ershi to flee with him until the very end but failed. His eyes were now filled with an even more intense hatred.

“Whether it’s a double trap, or a solo act by the Cavalry, we can’t be sure yet. What’s clear is that as long as we’re here, Ershi’s will won’t be broken.”

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement with Nahan’s words.

“That’s right… Indeed.”

“Although we couldn’t bring our brothers and sisters who were there, we’re not thinking of giving up here. What about you, brothers?”

The Awakeners looked at each other’s faces and swallowed hard. Then, they all nodded with faces filled with determination.

“Nahan. We believe in the true paradise you have spoken of. So your will is our will, brother.”

There was no one here who would falter just because Ershi had not returned. They were the Awakeners, who had lost their homes and suffered terribly, only to be carried into the perilous Great Sarain Forest at the edge of the west.

Nahan was the only one who had told them that they could express the anger, hatred, and sorrow that had been suppressed and built up throughout their lives.

Nahan had led those who hadn’t been able to properly use their abilities, and triumphantly shattered various parts of Tainu, punctured the aristocrats’ arrogance, and extracted information from their bellies. Despite his injured arm from the encounter with the Cavalry, not fully healed, he had helped Ershi wholeheartedly without shrinking or retreating.

A man possessing great and overwhelming power, moving solely for the Awakeners.

While with him, the Awakeners felt a strong sense of belonging and liberation for the first time since birth. Although there were colleagues who didn’t understand them, they knew that others would eventually come to realize that they were right.

The truth that the Awakeners were not weak.

That they must make those who treated them like slaves, like monsters, pay the price, only then could they build a true paradise.

“By now, our brothers at the auction house will be doing their best to crush the laughter of those who have been sucking our blood. We’ll be able to join them soon.”

“Let’s go!”

With hatred bordering on madness, they erased the last trace of fear and concern in their hearts, looked at each other's faces, and dispersed according to plan.

A moment later, there were loud noises, flames, and explosions all around the garden.

Listening to the chaos at the main gate where most of the guards were concentrated, Nahan chuckled quietly.

"Isn't it funny, Hosanna?"

"What do you mean?"

"Even though we've come here once and killed one of them, most of the guards are still facing outward."

Looking around the empty garden and laughing, Nahan's face turned grim.

"Sadly, it's all as expected. To them, that event must have become a non-issue."

A non-issue. The particularly emphatic words made Hosanna's eyes drop with sorrow. He opened his mouth to say something several times, but instead changed the subject.

"But… didn't you say most of the Cavalry would be here? The Cavalry Commander and that black-haired Cavalry member we saw before will also be here. I'm afraid, my lord, that you may run into them and get hurt again. This place… it's too dangerous."

Hosanna worriedly looked over Nahan's arm. Though it was covered by clothing, his shoulder had not yet fully healed. Commander Kishiar of the Cavalry, who had been known in the world as nothing but a foolish and licentious man, had been marked as one of the most dreaded figures to Hosanna since that incident.

“Didn’t I tell you to stop with these insolent thoughts, Hosanna?”

“…I’m sorry.”

Hosanna immediately averted his gaze from Nahan’s arm. Nahan began to speak as he closed his overcoat.

“The Cavalry, because of the last incident, has conflicted with the Duke of Tain, with the information that a member of the Cavalry is imprisoned. Most of their brethren will probably be focused on their internal watch duty. It’s a pitiful thing, as that’s all they can do in a position akin to the Emperor and nobles’ dogs.”

The man’s eyes, as he spat out the words “the nobles’ dogs,” were at a glance utterly calm, yet they gave off an endless darkness.

“That’s why I’m here, after all.”

“…”

Silence fell, and another explosion sounded in the distance. The sounds of running feet were heard, and it seemed the slow knights had finally rushed in.

Nahan placed his hand on Hosanna’s shoulder and exerted his power. Knights who had come close to them passed by the two without suspicion. Despite having seen this astonishing spectacle several times, Hosanna still caught her breath each time.

“Let’s go in. We must make the most of the opportunity our brothers have created.”

Avoiding others’ eyes, Nahan slowly surveyed the area as they reached the main building. Some had already fought here, and several beautiful garden trees were broken and tumbling.

“Why haven’t you prepared the carriage yet! Didn’t I say we’re leaving?”

“It’s dangerous now. Brave knights and Cavalry members are outside, so after the situation calms down a little…!”

Nahan, walking slowly behind them, looked coldly at a nobleman who was raising his voice at the servants inside the main gate.

“Eh? Just now, something… Ah!”

The nobleman, unable to control his anger, was beating a servant when he suddenly felt the presence of a stranger and turned his head. But Nahan was quicker, grabbing his head.

“Let go! Who dares to touch me…… Wha, what. What’s this? Aargh!”

The young nobleman in splendid attire screamed as a terrible illusion penetrated his brain before he could finish his words. Even after Nahan released him, he clutched his head and screamed like a beast, eventually thrashing his forehead against the walls and floor like a madman.

Moments later, something cracked in his overstrained head. Only after hearing the body fall limp did Hosanna, who had shut his eyes and turned away, open them again.

But the problem was that a servant who had come to his senses after seeing the dead nobleman was still there.

“Mo, monster. It’s a monster! Please, save me. Please……!”

As Nahan exerted his power once more, the servant’s eyes rolled back.

“Where is the younger brother of Baron Willhem, who was in charge of the Red Deer Consortium now?”

“…Agh. Lord Gra, Graham, is… on the 3rd… 3rd floor… “

After obtaining the information he sought, Nahan waved his hand, altering the illusion he had shown the servant. A moment later, the servant let out a strange noise and crawled out on all fours like a beast.

Having finished the task, Nahan reached out to Hosanna with a face as impassive as if nothing had happened. Hosanna bit his lip and once again followed behind him.

A few unlucky ones encountered Nahan after that and became new victims. As they approached their destination, they heard chaotic explosions and the sounds of battle from various places, but wherever they passed was eerily quiet.

Suddenly, Nahan stopped walking. His gaze was directed towards a man who stood alone at the entrance of the corridor where the third floor began.

The man had dark red skin and thick hair, showing his southern descent, but was wearing the light armor typical of the Orr Empire’s knights. The man stood quietly and solemnly, holding his drawn sword. The moment he lifted his head and faced Nahan and Hosanna, a heavy premonition swept through the corridor—a power that only one who had reached the extreme of swordsmanship could emit.

Even Hosanna, who knew nothing of what it meant to be a Swordsmaster, felt instinctively that their opponent was no ordinary knight and began to tremble.

“…Lord Nahan.”

Hosanna tried to grab Nahan with trembling hands, but Nahan coldly shook his head at him.

No matter how strong the knight might be, if he was not an Awakener, he could not be a match for him—that was Nahan's firm conviction.

"So, you must be Nahan."

The taciturn knight slowly opened his mouth and spoke.

"By my lord's command, no one may proceed beyond this point."

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“It sounds as if you knew we were coming here, Knight of Peletta.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“It’s impossible not to know the dogs that were running around looking for us everywhere in Tainu.”

It was a nearly provocative statement, but the knight didn’t respond. His attitude seemed to indicate that he was satisfied with the answer he got. Nahan asked again.

“So, what’s the answer? I asked first, after all.”

“His Lordship said you would certainly come here.”

The knight finally opened his tightly closed lips and spoke. With a look that was more desert-tribe-like than anyone, the aura he wore was as cold as a winter lake.

“To achieve what you desire, killing the Baron’s younger brother inside, along with Baron Willhem, and exposing it to the world, will be the most efficient method, and therefore, I will not give it up.”

“…”

“The turmoil you’ve created outside is just a distraction, isn’t it true that you’ve come this far because what you really want is that person?”

“You seem to think you know very well what we want.”

“Seeing that you’re not denying it, I guess so.”

Nahan responded without showing the slightest perturbation, but the expression on Hosanna's face behind him turned unconcealably pale.

The Commander of the Cavalry, Duke Peletta, had not been wrong in his conjecture at all.

'How did he know…?'

"So, why did the Commander of the Cavalry know we would come here, yet sent an ordinary knight instead of a member?"

"He said to practice."

"…Practice?"

Nahan, who slowly retorted, shortly after burst into a small laugh, as if finding it ridiculous.

"Did you treat me as a mere practice dummy for someone who is not even my brother? That's interesting. Did you really think it would be possible and come all the way here?"

"You'll know if you try."

The one who responded slowly and calmly then grabbed the sword that had been hanging loosely with both hands. A sharp premonition flowed over the raised silvery blade.

'What is this feeling? I'm scared, even though he's just holding a sword. I don't understand why.'

Hosanna was having such thoughts while looking at the impeccably clean sword that didn't show the slightest bit of energy, when Nahan opened his mouth with a similar thought.

"I thought a knight who knows how to use Aura would be confident, but why not use it? I must ask, are you an Awakener?"

‘Ah, yes. That’s right. I’ve heard that the Cavalry has those with abilities resembling Aura.’

If the man were an Awakener, this strange feeling could somehow be explained. However, contrary to their speculation, the knight shook his head.

“No.”

“Good. Then we don’t have to hesitate anymore.”

Nahan’s eyes sharpened.

“Hosanna, just do as we practiced for close combat. Get ready.”

As he finished speaking, Nahan grabbed Hosanna. Before the knight could swing his sword, Hosanna successfully used his ability to transport himself and Nahan behind the knight’s back.

Instantly, Nahan reached out and manipulated his fingers as if grabbing the back of the knight’s head, exerting his ability.

‘Done…! Ah?’

But this knight was unlike anyone they had faced before. Looking at the staggering man who had bent forward, and about to unwittingly relax, Hosanna screamed as he blinked to find the sword thrusting at them.

“Ah…!”

The tip of the sword grazed Hosanna’s face and almost pierced Nahan just as the teleportation ability activated again. They landed on the second floor, one level below their original position. Seeing Nahan bleed from his mouth, Hosanna was taken aback.

“My Lord!”

“…He’s definitely not an ordinary one. In that short time, he broke through the illusion ability I had set.”

“What? How…”

No matter how frantic the events that had occurred in the midst of chaos, how could such a thing be possible with just a sword?

Until now, he had heard that there was only one person who had ever broken the range that he had set when he had used his illusion ability. It was Yuder Aile, a member of the Cavalry with black hair, who he had encountered several times.

However, without a chance to ask in detail, the ceiling cracked and fragments struck his head. Hosanna dodged back using his ability once more.

For the next few minutes, an exchange of blows at an invisible speed occurred. The knight barely moved from the third floor, thoroughly facing them. While Hosanna moved from the third floor to the second, then back to the third, buying little time, Nahan continued to exert his ability on the knight, but their attacks missed by a hair and the knight counterattacked as if he had been waiting, making it difficult to find an opportunity to use his ability.

A terrifying sharpness that came from someone who had nearly been caught once by his illusion ability, which instilled fear and could drive a person mad in an instant.

“Such an ordinary-looking sword… Why is it so terrifying? What is it, really?”

When the knight’s sword approached, his body trembled for no apparent reason. He felt physical fear and wanted to flee for a reason different from when he used his ability.

Even Hosanna's eyes began to show the strain of overuse as they continued to use their short-range teleportation abilities.

They had trained many times together to dodge attacks through short-range movement, but using it so many times in a single breath was unprecedented. He was even surprised at himself that he could use his ability to such an extent. The pain in his head and eyes was excruciating, and he wanted to stop, but he couldn't. If he stopped, not only would he die, but Nahan would die as well.

"…Hosanna. Do you feel it?"

As they once again leapt across the floor, Nahan muttered softly.

"That man is really practicing against me right now."

"…"

Nahan's power was most effective when close to the target and when the target's body and mind were weak. Using it while moving was much harder and more fragile than when stationary.

As they couldn't be certain what power the knight was hiding, and after a failed attempt, Nahan began to be much more cautious. In contrast, the knight's attack speed and movement barely changed from the beginning.

It meant he had no doubt or fear of his opponents.

"…He has faced the Cavalry several times, so he may have learned something. Or maybe Gayle and Doyle have……"

"No. That's not the reason. He is…"

At that moment, the knight again revealed himself and launched an attack. Dodging back, Nahan spat out his words as though grinding them between his teeth near Hosanna.

“I suspect he might not even have what we consider fear, besides his hidden power.”

“…What?”

Hosanna turned his head. A sour taste began to creep in beyond his gradually labored breathing, but he couldn’t help it. A fearless person? Could such a person exist?

With a thoughtful expression, Nahan slowly opened his mouth.

“It seems I have no choice but to give something away, as I did when I faced his master before. Stop using the teleportation ability now, Hosanna.”

“No!”

“If things continue like this, you’ll exhaust your energy before achieving our goal, and we won’t be able to escape.”

“…But!”

“Hosanna.”

Hosanna couldn’t say a word in response. Nahan, his face streaked with blood, wiped it away gently and spoke quietly.

“He will be my opponent, so you go to the third floor and find our target. The moment you find them, kill them, and then escape with me. Can you do it?”

“But, but… I have never… not even once…”

“Just because you’ve never killed someone doesn’t mean you can’t do it now. You’re my only option at this point.”

In the words of the man whose face was half-covered with burns, there was a heavy and terrifying resonance. Hosanna couldn’t meet

his pale eyes and bowed his head. His clenched hands turned cold and trembled uncontrollably.

"…Hosanna."

"…I understand."

But faced with that unyielding expression, the only response he could muster was that simple agreement.

Hosanna nodded his head, his throat tensing as he used his teleportation ability once more.

As soon as he headed towards the corridor on the third floor, the knight, who seemed to have been waiting for them, raised his sword, looking no different than before. His appearance was more akin to a defensive wall than a human being.

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The knight approached in the blink of an eye and swung his sword, but this time, Hosanna did not move along with Nahan. The lanky young man from the south quickly leaped over the knight's back and then ran with a limp. At the same time, without hesitation, Nahan threw himself towards the sword. The knight attempted to withdraw his sword, but it was too late to fend off the relentless opponent.

A sound of flesh being pierced mingled with a stifled breath.

Holding the sword that had pierced his abdomen, Nahan gathered all his strength and used his ability.

The method he had used against Commander Kishiar of the Cavalry in Great Sarain Forest before, by sacrificing his shoulder, worked flawlessly this time as well.

At the moment of attack, a solid barrier in the enemy's mind momentarily wavered, allowing an opening to infiltrate.

Through that gap, the ability spread widely, engulfing the knight, and created an opaque wall of illusion that was only perceptible to Nahan.

A space where Yuder Aile had once been trapped was recreated, and the knight's body stiffened.

"…"

Nahan stared at the stationary knight with a sword thrust into his abdomen, breathing heavily with a furrowed face.

Creating this space was no easy task for him.

He dealt with two main types of illusions.

One was the illusion he created himself, and the other was an illusion created by the target of the ability.

Creating his own illusion was easy. He could manipulate simple landscape illusions to the point where he hardly felt any limitations. However, such illusions quickly lost their effectiveness against strong opponents.

On the other hand, making a subject create their illusion consumed much energy but had a far more potent effect. Those without any abilities could have their minds shattered in mere seconds facing that illusion.

The problem was when he had to face someone with enough strength to easily break through such illusions. To trap such individuals, Nahan had to put in extra effort.

So far, only three had required such effort.

Yuder Aile, Commander Kishiar, and the knight before his eyes.

Unlike the previous two, the fact that the knight was not even an Awakener irritated Nahan.

“Certainly, you got a kick out of it.”

He had thought that sending a non-Awakener against him was a trick to buy time, but now he had to admit that it was a miscalculation.

“…Kkuk.”

As he slowly pulled out the sword that had stabbed his abdomen, blood gushed out. Nahan quickly plugged the hole in his stomach

and slumped against a wall. With eyes filled with silent fury, he looked at the result of the ability he had created with all his soul.

Even humans who seem almost fearless are bound to fear something.

He might have been able to break through a weak range of power that had not even properly formed, but what about the ultimate illusionary wall that even Yuder Aile and the Commander had fallen into?

Nahan lifted the blood-soaked edge of his lips.

“From now on, I’ll uncover what you fear. Then I will discover your identity and secrets.”

At the moment he slowly stood up and was about to touch the wall,

A faint scream filled with shock and fear was heard.

“Aaah!……”

Though it was a soft sound, Nahan instantly recognized whose voice it was.

“…Hosanna?”

He turned his head, and from behind him, as if on cue, a completely different explosion sounded than any before. Beyond the broken windows in the aftermath of the battle, the bright red fire bombs that clearly lit up the night sky and soared countless times were danger signals fired by the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran.

A desperate and despairing signal that the plan to upend Baron Willhem’s mansion and kill the knights of Tainu as they were found had not gone as intended.

What on earth was happening?

Lost in thought without an answer, Nahan didn't notice the gradually trembling movement of the knight's fingertips trapped inside the illusory wall near him.

When he finally turned his head and realized what was happening, the last thing he saw was the blue aura of light that burst through the entire third-floor corridor.

…

"Your Highness. Your Highness. Are you awake?"

Kishiar was lying flat on the lounge bed, unresponsive to the sound of someone knocking at the door. The playful touch of his hand, fiddling with the sleeve of the neatly folded black formal coat beside him, was both mischievous and aimless.

The knocking on the door ceased for a moment, only to start again as a little time passed.

"I, Your Highness. Can you not hear? Duke Peletta!"

Thump, thump, thump. Thump, thump, thump, thump. The skill with which the door was knocked was truly exceptional. Not a hint of courtesy was felt.

Yet Kishiar ignored the call again. Next came a voice filled with irritation and anger.

"Your Highness Duke Peletta. Do you know how many hours it has been since you went inside? If you have heard even a little about the outside situation, it would be natural for you to lead us in person. Yet, what is the reason for your staying there? I cannot believe that you, the new owner of the Divine Sword and leader of

the Cavalry, would ignore your responsibility like this. Please tell us why!”

This speech was quite striking. Kishiar, lying on one arm, chuckled softly.

“So they say, but what do you think of the clothes my assistant left behind?”

The formal coat in Kishiar’s hand, belonging to Yuder, naturally gave no response.

“It’s quite amusing that those who had a hundred reasons to scoff at me as the real owner of the Divine Sword are suddenly talking about the responsibilities of the Divine Sword’s owner.”

They weren’t knocking on the door for the Duke of Peletta in this dangerous situation. He might appear higher in rank, but no one truly regarded him so; they just wanted to summon the man and push him in front of them. The rude tone, lacking even a semblance of courtesy, was quite impressive.

Long fingers played once more with Yuder’s coat sleeve in jest. Kishiar, who had been swaying the sleeve slowly as if dancing, attempted to ignore the loud voices from outside once more but stopped and listened when the content went beyond his expectations.

“Lord Moet. Have you forgotten who is inside? The one who should be responsible for this situation in the first place is Baron Willhem, who abandoned us. Who are you repeatedly telling to take responsibility? The one carrying the imperial blood is naturally supposed to be in the safest place, and those who received the title must protect him according to their oath, don’t you know?”

“Are you saying something that might be spoken in the old founding era? The Baron is gone, and the Baroness is unconscious,

so who exactly is supposed to step forward? No one is brave enough, so I did! I want to leave this place right now!”

“If that’s the case, then like the brave others who went outside earlier, you should go as well. Were you not the one who locked all the doors here, claiming it was too dangerous? You lack the courage to go out and fight for yourself, but you have the audacity to pound on the door and yell at the one who went to rest? Such ‘courage’ is truly laughable.”

“What?”

In the volatile atmosphere, the voices of the surrounding people scolding them could be heard. Even after the commotion had somewhat subsided, Lord Moet continued to rage on like a madman. It was typical for those who were pricked at their own faults to get even angrier.

“Lord Koelt. Are you proud to have been invited here, being nothing now but a relic of your past glory…?”

Koelt. Repeating that name to himself, Kishiar recognized him as the nobleman who had only admired artworks alone, never approaching Kishiar except for today’s greeting.

In his red eyes, an interesting light sparkled for the first time, and at that moment, the sound of fireworks bursting loudly outside the open window was heard.

Without a hint of surprise, Kishiar turned his head and soon afterward shifted his gaze downward. A quick and brief blue light flashed, coloring the night sky before vanishing. Then, the floor below vibrated for a while.

“Nathan, the boy. Making quite the racket.”

As if in response to the soft mutter, a small note fell onto the bed where Kishiar had been lying, glowing faintly.

To our esteemed Commander. We’ve captured them all! From Finn Eldore.

The slightly slanted but crisp writing conveyed the writer’s temperament. Kishiar casually flipped the note over, and a hastily written postscript caught his eye.

One has escaped.

His red eyes narrowed. He stared at the short postscript for a long time before lightly crushing it. Once again, only a handful of ashes remained in his relaxed hand.

A pity. The words that had been whispered within his mouth disappeared, and Kishiar, now risen, moved from the small, cramped bed that was shorter than himself.

He cracked the door open, and those who had been crowded outside all looked up at him.

Finally revealing himself, Duke Peletta did not seem to have any intention of hiding what he had been doing inside.

Brushing his disheveled golden hair aside and yawning ostentatiously, his face, still exuding residual heat, gave off an excessively sensual allure. The shirt carelessly thrown over his bare chest, unbuttoned, exposed his entire chest, and his crumpled, hastily redressed pants were just as bad. The reek of spilled alcohol was so strong that it masked the rank smell of sex, and the crowd might have thought that was rather fortunate.

It was unbelievable. Hours had passed since the party hall had been ruined, yet Duke Peletta had truly continued that act with his subordinate.

Stunned by a behavior more licentious than rumors suggested, people were still drawn to stare at Kishiar, who sighed deeply in feigned ignorance and finally spoke.

“Why on earth are you guys making such a racket? I simply cannot sleep.”

“Your Highness, why are you coming out only now? Do you know what’s going on outside?”

The young nobleman, Moet, who had been urgently knocking on the door, quickly stepped forward and exclaimed. His tone was incredibly rude to address someone of a higher rank, but Kishiar only raised an eyebrow and did not blame him, calmly replying.

“Situation? Judging by the crowd gathered here… Have all the other lounges been filled? Haha. If that’s the case, I apologize, but I still need to use this place for a while.”

“No! No one has come here to go in there.”

Moet’s face turned crimson as he shook his head.

“Hmm? Then what?”

“There was a loud noise outside all the time; do you really not know what’s happening? We are virtually trapped here due to the intrusion of the bandits!”

“Trapped?”

“Yes. We heard that the knights are struggling outside, but we know nothing else. Now, only Your Highness, the master of the divine sword and the leader of the Cavalry, can resolve this situation for us. Please take a closer look.”

At Moet’s words, the nobles bowed their heads unanimously in agreement. Only Koelt, the nobleman who had fought with him, looked straight at Kishiar, fists clenched.

An image of a gentle-looking man of an age to possibly have young children, staring straight ahead with sunset-like eyes beyond his glasses, was rather impressive. Perhaps it reminded Kishiar of his own elder brother, who might be associated with a scholar or teacher.

Kishiar casually asked Koelt, “You seem to have something else to say. What is it?”

As if he had been waiting, the nobleman immediately spoke.

“While it’s true that we are trapped here, it’s not because of an external factor but because we locked all the doors and windows from the inside. Rather than hoping for Your Highness to take the lead, shouldn’t we first unlock the door ourselves and call in the servants and knights?”

“Lord Koelt is not correct, Your Highness!” shouted Moet, raising his head and glaring at Koelt.

“Opening the doors that were closed for safety before the situation is resolved is nonsensical!”

Then, others began to add their opinions, and the area quickly became noisy. Most of them were in agreement with Moet.

The people remaining here were mostly those socially left behind enough not to know even about the auction, and among them, especially those who were very fearful.

Except for a very small number, like Lord Koelt.

Kishiar smiled briefly before speaking up to prevent the atmosphere from turning hostile again.

“Well, it’s all fine. But what do you mean by asking me to take responsibility and act on your behalf while also wanting not to open the locked doors?”

“Your Grace, Duke Peletta, has been recognized as the new master of the divine sword and is also the one who leads the Cavalry outside, are you not?”

“And so?”

“We, without strength, may find it impossible, but surely the heroic Yude Al, who serves you, can easily solve this situation from here…”

Moet’s voice trailed off as he looked past Kishiar to the bed shrouded in darkness. He then shouted, as if to a commoner with black hair who he presumed was lying there, as though expecting him to listen.

“Certainly, I came to beg you to give the order!”

“…”

Kishiar’s expression hadn’t changed a bit, either before or after hearing the words. He still wore the languid face of a debauched man whose lust was not completely extinguished, and the habitual smile at the corner of his mouth remained intact.

However, in spite of that, everyone present in that place felt a momentary and inexplicable chill.

With a sensation as if the sky was crashing down to crush him, Moet involuntarily swallowed his breath and clenched his buttocks,

only to shudder at the sensation that disappeared as if it were a lie, moments later.

“The, just now, what…?”

“Oh. Are you alright? At this rate, you might collapse even before I find out what’s happening outside.”

Kishiar tenderly expressed his concern, addressing Moet.

“Your worries are all valid. The master of the house has left his post in a dangerous situation; how could you not be anxious?”

“That… That’s true.”

“But here’s the thing. I don’t know this person named Yude Al, so I can’t give the order.”

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Chapter 420

“…Yes?”

The face of Lord Moet, who had just regained his composure at Kishiar’s agreement, was filled with doubt.

“What is that… you speak of?”

“Sorry, but the person with me is merely my assistant, and also has the honorable title of Yuder Aile, bestowed by His Majesty the Emperor. I do not know anyone called ‘Yude Al,’ so it seems I’ll be unable to comply with your request. I think I need to rest again.”

Kishiar softly repeated his response and then closed the door once more. In the ensuing silence, Lord Moet stood dumbfounded, only regaining his senses a moment later, deep in thought.

It’s not as if remembering the name and title of a commoner is that important, but if it’s something bestowed by the Emperor, the situation changes slightly.

Even though no one doubts that the occupant of the throne will change within a few years, as of now, Emperor Keilusa still sat on the throne, and the one inside that room was the Emperor’s only blood brother and a Duke.

If such a person were to take a minor mistake as an intentional insult to the Emperor, it would be greatly troublesome.

“Your Highness, Your Highness! I misspoke because I was unaware of the situation. What I meant to say was that I wish for your assistant Yu…der Aile to step forward and handle this matter. If there has been a misunderstanding…!”

“Hmm. You mean my assistant Yuder Aile, right?”

The door cracked open again, revealing red eyes. Lord Moet quickly nodded.

“Yes.”

“But it’s still confusing. Even if you were unaware of the situation, how could you forget the name of the person you wished to ask a favor of?”

Wasn’t it ridiculous for Duke Peletta, who was neither wise nor well-behaved and whose tutors changed monthly during his princehood, to say such a thing? Deeply aggrieved and angry, Lord Moet bowed his head to hide his expression.

“That is not… a memory issue, but rather because I have not been feeling well lately, and sometimes my hearing becomes muffled…”

“Is that so? I thought you were not old enough to experience deafness and senility, but it seems you’ve aged quite a bit. There’s no stopping the passage of time, I understand. Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

Kishiar opened his eyes wide and shamelessly responded. His choice of words was truly delicate. Lord Moet’s bearded chin quivered with indignation several times before he could stop it.

“Yes… It was merely a hearing mistake. Please know that I did not dare distort His Majesty’s will or intend to insult. Now… will you accept our request?”

“I wonder…”

Duke Peletta, smiling, opened the door even wider and stepped out completely.

“Is it really necessary for my assistant to go out just to check the situation outside?”

“Yes?…”

“That’s something I can do myself. I’ll be right back.”

Kishiar closed the door and moved forward, his reply even lighter and more carefree than if he were going out for a night drink. Watching the duke pass by them, barefoot and dressed in disheveled formal wear, the nobles all wore expressions as if they were about to faint.

“Yo, Your Grace! You can’t go like that!”

“Our request did not mean that… Your Highness!”

Kishiar turned his head towards those chasing after him. Fearing that he might ask them to come along, they all recoiled in surprise. Kishiar smiled brightly at their comical reactions.

“Ah, I see. Just checking would be no fun, shall we place a bet? Thanks to my brave soldiers and knights, I’ll wager 5,000 that the situation outside is not as dangerous or serious as you folks think. What say you?”

“I, I…”

Lord Moet stammered without finishing his sentence, lowering his head. Kishiar clicked his tongue in disappointment.

“Really now? Are there none here who know the pleasure of a bet? Oh well, then I’ll open the door.”

“Your Highness! You mustn’t!”

The nobles rushed over to stop Kishiar, who was hastily trying to clear the chairs and tables blocking the hall’s entrance.

“The villains outside are already lurking! We will all be killed! Your Highness!”

“Stop the Duke, everyone!”

But the flamboyantly dressed young duke easily brushed aside the restraining hands as if they were merely annoying, laughing and pushing aside all the furniture in an instant.

“What’s all this fuss? Everyone worries about me too much. Even I feel slightly embarrassed to be so loved by everyone. There’s no need for this, you know?”

Although he didn’t move with much force, the nobles were thrown about, making sounds of pain. From afar, it looked like a farce.

Lord Moet grabbed Kishiar’s arm but let go instantly, watching with his mouth agape.

A madman. Duke Peletta was indeed insane.

He had heard whispered rumors of the Duke’s eccentric behavior in the capital’s social circles, but what he was witnessing now went far beyond those tales. This wasn’t merely eccentricity; it was the act of a fearless and deranged person.

Though some may have doubted Kishiar’s appearance, the nobles of the west who had regarded him lightly were gasping for breath. Eventually, all obstacles were cleared, and the door opened.

“No!”

Lord Moet, along with most of the nobles, covered their heads with their hands, crouched or turned their backs, looking for places to hide.

Soon, the barbaric invaders would reveal themselves. The pungent smell of blood would pierce their noses, and screams, previously silenced by the closed door, would assail their ears!

But after a long moment, nothing happened. The silent situation bewildered the nobles, who slowly peeked out from their hiding places.

Then, without exception, their eyes widened in shock.

In front of the open door, Duke Peletta saw no corpses or blood as they had anticipated.

The barefoot Duke was standing in front of the door, smiling as he looked down at the respectfully kneeling on one knee and saluting black-clothed Cavalry members and knights, along with a few bound individuals lying on the ground, all with a smile on his face.

"…"

"I report that the unexpected emergency situation has been dealt with, and the intruders have been captured, Commander!"

A blue-haired boy at the forefront of the Cavalry spoke with a clear and dignified voice, bowing his head. The other members also bowed simultaneously, unfazed by Duke Peletta's appearance.

"Hmm, I've won the bet. But since there's nothing to take, what now?"

Kishiar turned around with a bright smile in his eyes. Seeing the blood splatter on the young boy's pale cheek behind the Duke, the nobles were paralyzed with terror, unable to utter a word.

…

“Yuder! We’ve found most of the distinguished guests who attended the auction. Let’s check Kanna’s side and head back.”

“Understood.”

Yuder stopped the power of the earth and leaped down from the tree he had continued to climb, preparing for any contingency. He moved along with Ever. She had just completed her mission of understanding the situation in the auction house and commanding the members, having defeated Ershi as she had confidently assured, and coming here right after.

Yuder silently examined Ever’s face, which, though filled with cuts that seemed to have been made by a thin blade on every exposed piece of skin, did not lose its smile.

“Hmm? Don’t worry about this. It’s nothing. Ershi is in worse shape than me.”

Ever, seeming to notice where Yuder’s gaze had fallen, casually lifted her hand and wiped away the bloodstains.

Some of the guests, who had thought the situation that seemed like a sudden earthquake was actually caused by the Cavalry, were still screaming and resisting, but the Cavalry members didn’t pay them any more attention than they would to barking dogs, as they took them away and loaded them into carriages.

“Did you hear that Kanna handled her part well?”

“I heard so. They’ve captured all of Star of Nagran members there, but it’s a bit of a shame that they didn’t catch all the southern merchants who were in the warehouse.”

While Yuder was continuously raising the power of the earth by himself, blocking the exit, the members had captured those designated according to their roles. The strategy of exploiting the

confusion of those who thought a natural disaster had occurred went as planned, but the problem was that the southern merchants who had been in the warehouse had escaped using a secret third exit that was inside.

With information from Pruelle and Robel, they thought there were no other escape routes there, but the inside of the warehouse, which was said to have been inaccessible to anyone other than the southerners, acted as an unexpected variable.

The southerner who had fought with Yuder, as well as several other southerners who had been seen with him in the inn, had hidden themselves through the secret passage. All they took with them was a sack filled with substituted Calanesa powder.

“You fools! Do you know who I am? Let go!”

At that moment, Yuder heard the sound of another noble struggling near him. Turning his head, he recognized the man and stopped in his tracks.

“Yuder?”

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Chapter 421

A few paces ahead, Ever's gaze shifted toward the people Yuder was looking at.

"Why those people?"

Apparently, she didn't remember all the faces she had seen during Apeto Family's trial. Yuder kept silent for a moment before speaking.

"Those are Apeto Family's people. The representatives who appeared in the first trial, do you remember?"

"The first trial? …Oh? Now that you mention it, they do look familiar?"

Only then did a genuinely pleased smile blossom on Ever's face.

"My goodness. How did you recognize that they were here?"

Yuder explained that he had seen them arriving late at the auction house.

"They must have fled to the West because they're so guilty. Yet they still had the audacity to come here. How grateful and joyful I am."

Indeed, he agreed.

"We must isolate those people in a special place."

And if done properly, they might be able to catch the tail of other Apeto Family people who had escaped the trial. Yuder made a small request to the very delighted Ever.

“Before that, can you release them for a moment?”

“Now?”

Seeing Yuder’s nod, Ever raised her hand to the members without asking anything further. As the signal to release was given, the members hesitated but soon relaxed their grip, and Apeto Family’s fugitives quickly scrambled towards the inner garden.

“What do you plan to do now?”

“Move the others to the security management team first, but just pretend to chase those people and leave them alone until they beg to be caught.”

The vast garden surrounding the auction house was now as good as in Yuder’s palm. As he reached down subtly, moving the power of the earth, a deep rumble echoed through their feet.

“What did you do?”

“I changed the structure of the garden a little.”

Though all escape routes were already blocked, Yuder had added a touch of variation, creating a maze.

Now, Apeto Family’s fugitives would face things they’d never encountered before, inside that space.

No matter how much they ran, they could not find the right path, and they would return here, chased once more by terror. How long could those precious people endure?

Their bodies, never having endured hardship, would scream, and there would be no one to heed them. The sight of them wailing as their fine clothes were torn, slogging through muddy pits, was already in his eyes.

Their tongues, so agile in the courtroom, would be of no use in that garden.

Ever, understanding that they would be left alone until they broke their high pride and begged to be caught, burst into a clear laughter.

“My goodness! You want them to taste what it feels like to be hunted! That’s much better than just scolding them!”

Ever immediately called a few members and explained the situation, entrusting them with the task of chasing Apeto Family’s fugitives lightly. The members, who had learned that the ones who had dared to insult their Commander at the trial were there, quickly ignited with passion.

However, other members who quickly received the inforMartyon also crowded around, all raising their hands wanting to participate, leading to debates and even fights to determine the order.

Watching everyone fiercely argue that they could chase the fugitives better, without a single person backing down, Yuder thought how much they had changed since they first joined the Cavalry.

To be honest, it was quite nice to see those who sincerely followed Kishiar, stepping forward without hesitation to work for him.

“It’s a shame. I wanted to enjoy the thrill of hunting prey in the maze created by Yuder,” said Ever, genuinely disappointed as she moved on. They entered the auction house, walking down the hallway, a mess with broken and scattered items.

“Kanna is by the back door where the warehouse is.”

The workers who had followed the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran or the Southern merchants captured by Kanna and Robel were not kept with the distinguished guests, in case of unexpected dangers. They planned to transport and confine them separately.

“Kanna!”

“Ever, Yuder!”

Standing in front of the warehouse with a blue roof, Kanna waved with a smile. Next to her stood Robel, his arms and neck wrapped in cloth. Yuder carefully surveyed the dozen or so unfamiliar people under the watch of the Cavalry members behind him before speaking.

“I didn’t hear that Robel was hurt.”

“I just got nicked while trying to protect the list from those guys. The list is undamaged and safe, so don’t worry,” Robel said with an awkward smile on his embarrassed face. But Kanna shook her head as if to deny it completely and explained what had happened.

“Things almost got dangerous because those people didn’t care about hurting themselves as they charged in, but Robel helped. That’s how he got hurt.”

Kanna and Robel originally planned to find the list first and then capture the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran. But as they found the list, they encountered the Star of Nagran, who were confused due to an unexpected earthquake, and a standoff ensued between the two recognized groups.

At that moment, the rest of their party was momentarily scattered, leaving only the two with the weakest combat abilities to protect the list.

Robel, recognized by his former colleagues, wanted to fight them, enraged by their mocking that he was still alive. His desire to find out Nahan’s whereabouts and avenge Marty had clouded his mind.

But hearing Kanna loudly calling out unknown information about Marty, he suddenly snapped out of it.

Seeing one of the Star of Nagran’s Awakeners, who would rather self-destruct than fail, he inadvertently recalled Yuder’s words and threw himself in, exerting his ability.

His previously considered modest ability, which was to slightly control the wind, did something unprecedented. Robel managed to lift Kanna and the list, who almost fell down the collapsing stairs, and even the Awakener trying to explode, into the air and drop them far away.

He was injured as he tumbled down, hit by debris and attacks, but Kanna safely protected the list, regrouped with her fellow members, and successfully captured the remaining the Star of Nagran.

“If Deputy Commander Kanna hadn’t told me about Marty back then, I would have probably messed up the job in blind revenge, not even recalling Yuder’s words. I wouldn’t have realized the true use of my ability. I never felt so at ease before,” Robel said, looking extremely relaxed despite his wounds. It seemed as if he had partially escaped from the heavy burden that had been weighing him down.

“What did you tell him, Kanna? When did you learn about Marty?”

Kanna grinned slightly in response to Ever’s question, asked in a hushed voice.

“That short tie that Robel was carrying was given to me in advance by a person named Marty. When I touched it by chance, the information was somewhat readable. Marty… she was really worried about him.”

More than any good advice, it was ultimately emotions that best move a person’s heart. Kanna had succeeded in stopping Robel, releasing the information she had read with an expertise incomparable to before.

In some respects, it was a power far stronger than a fearsome weapon or the ability to blow up an entire building.

“Our captives are almost unconscious, but you can wake them and ask questions if you want.”

“That’s okay. I’d like to see inside the warehouse.”

Yuder turned his gaze to the closed warehouse door.

“Oh, because of the secret passage?”

Kanna guided him, seemingly knowing why he wanted to see it.

“Here it is. Be careful following me; things have spilled everywhere. Uh… see below that shelf?”

Among the counterfeit items that had been scattered and tangled, a small hole was visible below the twisted shelf. It was a passage just big enough for one person to get through.

“It’s a tunnel dug through the floor, and when the lid is closed, it just looks like the floor. Luckily, I got my hands on it and figured it out quickly.”

After realizing that those who should have been inside had disappeared, Kanna immediately used her abilities. No matter how stealthy the passage, as long as the thoughts of those who had used it remained strong, there was no way to avoid her ability.

“Did you go inside?”

“Yes. The exit is near the north gate, a little away from the auction house. I came back because it looked like they’d already escaped. I want to read a bit more before their information gets erased. Sorry, I couldn’t catch them.”

Kanna had no reason to be sorry in Yuder's eyes. She had been busy participating in the mission as soon as she returned, yet she performed more reliable actions than anyone else. What could she possibly be sorry for?

Ever seemed to think the same way and comforted Kanna by holding her.

"What are you talking about? It was my job, but since I was late, it's my fault. If it weren't for you, Kanna, we wouldn't have known about that passage for a long time. Why do you say that? I can't tell you how grateful I am to you."

"It was my job to stop those inside from getting out. If we must find fault, I would bear the most blame."

Upon hearing Yuder's response, Kanna's eyebrows dropped, and she tightened her lips. Even though she hadn't shown it, she seemed quite frustrated for having missed the southern merchants.

"Thank you. But neither of us is at fault, so please don't say that."

In truth, since they knew where the southern merchants came from and where they were headed, there was no major issue this time. Moreover, even the Calanesa powder they had taken was not real.

Kanna knew this fact too, but she couldn't help feeling a little disappointed and smiled faintly.

"I wanted to show our Commander that I did better when reporting my return."

It wasn't fear of making a mistake or worry about getting scolded. It was a statement that showed how much Kanna respected and trusted Kishiar as her leader.

That trust and confidence, entirely different from her previous life, settled Yuder's heart more securely than ever before.

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Chapter 422

“Then I’ll go ahead now.”

“Ah, Yuder. You should take this with you.”

As Yuder stepped outside, Kanna handed over a bundle of papers she had been holding tightly. That ordinary bundle, tied with a string, was the list of those who had attended the auction that day.

In addition to the guests, this list, which included the names of those who had actually prepared the auction and related parties, would become the best evidence to prove and corner someone’s unjust actions in the future.

“Please deliver it to the Commander. See you later!”

“Okay.”

Yuder nodded and leaped into the air, soon becoming distant from the waving figures of Ever and Kanna.

Though the journey here seemed very short, the way back was strangely long and slow. No matter how much he sped up, jumping twice as high as before, Baron Wilhelm’s mansion still seemed infinitely far away.

The reason was simple. It was his impatience to get back a little faster.

In his previous life, the journey back after completing a mission had never felt so slow and frustrating. There was no reason to return early, nor anyone he particularly wanted to see.

But now, Yuder was painfully regretful that he couldn’t run a little faster.

Leaping off the wind, he bounded over a few roofs, his shadow momentarily grasping a giant branch and then soaring across the night sky of Tainu. His pace was so fast that an ordinary person might not even recognize him passing by. Finally, the entrance to Baron Wilhelm’s mansion appeared in Yuder’s view.

The two windows from which he had escaped a few hours ago were still wide open.

Without another thought, Yuder poured all his strength into his feet. The wind’s force wrapped around his legs and then exploded, propelling him into the air. In the moment he jumped over the sharp, thorny iron fence without a scratch, like a bird, he noticed a pair of red eyes looking at him from the open window.

At the same time, the surrounding time slowed down infinitely. His sharpened senses dulled, and his unacknowledged impatience extinguished like a wet match.

Only those eyes felt like the only thing existing in this world.

Joy sparkled and shone in Kishiar’s eyes as he stood in the window, opening his arms without hesitation.

Before he even realized what it meant, Yuder took one last leap off the wind and jumped through the window, where strong arms eagerly embraced him. The two bodies fell back into the room, collapsing together.

Yuder lay in Kishiar’s arms, catching his breath. The warmth of the body beneath him enveloped him with every rise and fall of the chest.

“Did you have a good trip?”

As if savoring his scent, a smiling voice tickled his ear as he took a deep breath.

“…Yes.”

“Any injuries?”

“None.”

As if to make sure, Kishiar felt Yuder’s back, arms, and legs, and when his fingers reached the nape, pulling off the hood, tangled black hair and eyes still tinged with gold were revealed.

Caressing the clean and pale cheek without a single wound, Kishiar finally wore a satisfied smile.

“I see.”

“First… please accept this.”

Yuder firmly handed over the list to Kishiar, ensuring that he didn’t drop it. Yuder knew better than anyone what it was, and how important it was, but Kishiar, seemingly unconcerned, did not even unfold it, casually laying it down beside him. It seemed as though embracing Yuder and indulging in the aroma of his body was more important, as the touch of his hands was endlessly gentle and affectionate.

With each touch, shivers ran down Yuder’s spine, but he barely managed to recall where and when they were.

“Now, please let go. Isn’t it heavy?”

“On the contrary, it’s so light that it’s a problem. Just a little longer like this…”

In the past, Yuder would have immediately risen whether Kishiar said so or not, but not now. Yuder fell into silence for a moment, then

slightly relaxed his body. Kishiar lightly kissed the tip of his nose, as if to say he had done well.

On the floor, not even a bed, daringly lying on the body of a duke, yet feeling as if he had returned to his rightful place, he was enveloped by this profound sense of security.

“But…”

“Hmm?”

“Why are your clothes so disheveled? Has something happened?”

As Yuder’s captivated mind began to return to normal and he regained his usual calm, he noticed something he hadn’t before.

Beneath the dim lantern that faintly lit the darkness, Kishiar appeared almost undressed compared to when Yuder had left. He was so scantily clad that his body was more exposed than when they shared a bed to sleep.

Surely, Kishiar had planned to feign sharing a bed with Yuder here while waiting, but he had not said that he would be so undressed at that time. They were planning to infiltrate Baron Willhem’s mansion, and Kishiar was supposed to deliver the final blow once all the intruders were dealt with. Could it be that he hadn’t finished there yet?

Kishiar let out a suspicious and secretive smile, noticing Yuder’s question.

“I’ve finished everything here according to plan. Though I did let Nahan escape. Did you know he came this way?”

“Ah, yes. I thought he might be, since he was missing from the security management team and not in the auction house. But you

missed him… Is Nathan Zuckerman okay?”

If Nahan and his companions had come to Baron Willhem’s mansion to kill Graham Willhem as Kishiar anticipated, it was Nathan Zuckerman’s job to handle them. Kishiar had decided it, and Yuder, confident that he wouldn’t easily be pushed back by Nahan or any other Awakeners, had been eagerly awaiting the result.

“It’s fine. He seems to have taken a hit to his pride, though, since he caught Hosanna, one with teleportation ability, but still let him escape.”

Even though Hosanna was caught first, he managed to escape alone against Nathan Zuckerman? Annoyingly, he was good at running away.

‘But there are others who are really good at running away on our side, too.’

“Actually, I lost some southern merchants on my end. There was an additional passage I didn’t know about.”

Yuder confessed his failure, thinking of Kanna, and added one more thing.

“That’s largely my fault, so if there needs to be a penalty, give it to me.”

“Why would it be the assistant’s fault?”

Kishiar finally sat up, his gaze deeply settling on Yuder’s face as if searching for something. Yuder blinked, noticing only then that Kishiar was not only half-dressed but also without shoes. His appearance was so inexplicable that Yuder could not guess what had happened.

“Was there something else besides the passageway?”

The man who had casually perched on the chair, not minding his bare feet, opened his mouth to ask.

Yuder briefly reported on Kanna's fortuitous return, which could be seen as a variable but was rather a stroke of luck on their part, and the events that occurred during the mission. There were incidents, like Robel's injury when facing the Star of Nagran and Ershi that almost went berserk, or the Apeto family fugitives found among the guests, but still, Kishiar gave a small nod at the words that they were able to complete everything as planned.

"So it happened. Kanna returned at an opportune time."

"Yes."

"So, the reason you tried to blame the flight of the southern merchants on yourself was because of that?"

"…"

Silence was answer enough. The man who noticed Yuder's attempt to cover for Kanna and placed blame on himself concealed his eyes and burst into laughter.

"I thought you were hiding something serious when you suddenly blamed yourself, but I'm relieved that wasn't the case. It was merely the result of warm camaraderie."

Yuder was momentarily taken aback, having not anticipated that Kishiar would accept his words in that way.

"I didn't expect you to see it that way. I apologize."

"No, it's fine. It was a fine display of comradeship. I just find it amusing, so don't worry about it."

Kishiar laughed a little more and then reached out his hand to Yuder.

“Sit here. A lot has happened here too, in your absence. You must know what you need to know before you go out.”

“Was there something else besides Nahan’s escape? Oh, did some problem arise because I came back too late?”

“Um… if it’s similar, then it’s similar.”

Yuder was about to say that he didn’t care at all if rumors spread that he had been in a break room with Kishiar for several hours, but Kishiar was quicker to open his mouth.

“Well, the Duke of Peletta simply did what befits the Duke of Peletta. Finding some interesting characters in the process was just a bonus.”

With a face that seemed both playful and genuinely refreshed, the man who had spoken as if in jest began to tell his story.

Yuder attentively listened, not wanting to miss a single word of what he was telling.

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Chapter 423

At Baron Willhem's mansion, all the intruders were dealt with, and nobles raised their voices before Kishiar, who had been waiting, and among them, one person who attracted attention with an unusual demeanor.

Yuder noticed the pleased expression on Kishiar's face as he spoke about a man named Lord Koelt, realizing that he had taken a considerably positive interest in the man.

"…So after wrapping up the matter, I subtly probed the other nobles to find out about him. Some rather interesting stories emerged."

Yuder felt a strong sign in Kishiar's eyes asking him to quickly ask him what the interesting story was. Yuder, following his wish, opened his mouth and asked,

"What story might that be?"

"Lord Koelt, like Baron Willhem, was once part of Duke of Tain's jurisdiction. Up to a few decades ago, his family, along with Willhem's, managed various parts of the western region of Tainu."

Both families were once prestigious, working hand in hand with the duke to lead the West. However, Baron Willhem's ambition to monopolize power gradually distorted their relationship. By the time of the previous Duke of Tain, this became more pronounced, and eventually, the Koelt family lost everything and fell into ruin.

Still, the reputation of the family that had long managed Tainu remained intact. Even after their fall, the Koelt family did not cease their personal dedication to the West.

The current Lord Koelt continued to sponsor the humble temples his ancestors had supported and assisted orphans in becoming independent. He was also quite a renowned scholar.

Baron Willhem seemed to have often expressed his anger in private, saying that he still thought he still mattered in Tainu.

“So, rather than cutting off all ties, he seems to have enjoyed summoning him to events like this to reprimand him. Judging by the fact that Lord Koelt came despite expecting to be ignored, he is no ordinary fool either.”

Although he called Lord Koelt foolish, Kishiar’s eyes contained a fondness for meeting a desirable talent.

“You seem pleased.”

“Do I?”

Smiling, Kishiar reached over and brushed Yuder’s forehead.

“Yes. I quite like such people. Very much so.”

“…”

His eyes were candid, and Yuder knew that “such people” included him. The phrase “I like” sounded strange all of a sudden, so Yuder closed his mouth and didn’t respond. Tilting his head, the man grinned as if amused by this reaction.

“Anyway, I’m actually considering the possibility that Lord Koelt might be one of Pruelle van Tain’s sources of secret information. That will become clearer as I investigate further.”

“That seems highly likely.”

Pruelle had been obtaining a lot of information through friends from his childhood spent in Tainu. Who exactly had informed him

remained a secret, but the high quality and speed of the information he had acquired thus far indicated that it wasn't just from those working beneath him.

"So, after finding out more about him, what do you intend to do?"

"Put him to use."

Kishiar responded without hesitation.

"I was hesitating a lot about who to recommend for work in the West after Baron Willhem's influence waned. I was shamefaced for not having a name to put in a letter to His Majesty, but now I can write with confidence. I cannot tell you how relieved I am."

Satisfaction welled up in the crimson eyes. Yuder quietly contemplated it, thinking,

'It really is completely different from my previous life.'

The western region in his previous life was shattered by the mass emergence of monsters. Rebuilding the west through trade was a policy promised by Emperor Katchian, but its failure resulted in an endlessly slow recovery. Except for a few nobles who profited from the policy, most lost their homes and wealth.

With people becoming destitute, the west turned into a breeding ground for crime, a veritable headache. Even the nobles who had lived there for generations struggled to manage, and it was hard to find anyone willing to take on the task.

Among them, Tainu's case was the worst. There were recurring complaints from the Duke of Tain, unable to find a suitable person to manage Tainu, his domain.

It must have meant that, unlike now, the Duke of Tain had entirely lost the public's favor in the west back then.

But if someone like Lord Koelt were to manage Tainu, together with the successor of the Duke of Tain - Pruelle's younger sibling - it could be reborn into something far better than before.

Now there would be no monster invasions, no shattered cities, no individuals blinded by greed and willing to buy and sell anything.

"…That's good. It would truly be fortunate for the people here."

Yuder finally felt a weight lifted off his shoulders and his lips curled into a smile.

"You must have had a deep attachment to the West? Seeing how happy you are."

Kishiar softly asked.

The two locked eyes in the quiet darkness.

'Ah. I see.'

Yuder suddenly realized that the current Kishiar did not know the true cause of his joy.

Despite it being a natural thing, a difficult-to-explain emotion washed over him, and his joy slowly faded.

He maintained his silence for a long time before responding in his usual tone.

"…Yes. It seems so."

Red eyes stared at his calm lips for a long time.

…

"Is anyone there? Get me out!"

Baron Willhem, trapped on the third floor of the security management team's underground dungeon, was somewhat deflated by the fact that no one came despite his shouting all night.

Thinking about the previous night was terrifying. The mysterious assailants targeting his life when he was transporting the 'horses' entrusted by the Duke of Tain; the treacherous southern merchant who fled, leaving him behind; and the Cavalry who knocked him out without hesitation and threw him here.

What enraged him most was, naturally, the last part.

"Damn lowlifes. How dare they put me here…!"

Although it was somewhat of a misunderstanding, he was practically the master of Tainu, a noble. Even if he was subject to an investigation, it was proper to send him home first. He had never heard of such treatment before. It was the worst.

The Baron incessantly pondered what he would say once he left this place. In the absence of someone to listen, it was a fruitless effort, but he couldn't help it; the prison was too cold.

He had not known that the prison was this cold, even though he had frequented it for so long.

The wind seemed to be leaking from somewhere, and no matter how much he wrapped himself in his cloak, the cold wouldn't go away. The stone floor, without a single straw to use as bedding, was so hard and painful that it gave him the shivers to touch it. There were no patrolling soldiers, and no one to ask what was going on; he was unable to receive help no matter how much he yelled. He didn't even have anyone to ask what had happened.

'I must quickly inform Duke Tain of this fact.'

The auction would have proceeded somehow even without him. It had to. Even if the cavalry brutes had caught wind of ‘words’ about me, finding evidence would not have been easy. They should not have dared to do this to me just because of the common people’s words.

‘If only Duke Tain learns of this fact…’

Crouched and trembling with only that thought in mind, suddenly there was the sound of a door opening somewhere. The footsteps were not of one person but several. The startled Baron, who jumped to his feet, quickly grabbed the bars and shouted loudly.

But moments later, when Baron Willhem recognized the ones approaching where he was imprisoned, his eyes widened in disbelief.

“What, what is this…?”

“…”

The ones led by the soldiers, half-unconscious and covered in dirt, were known to Willhem.

They were nobles from the Apeto family, who had been staying in Tainu for a while due to recent unpleasant events in the capital. Why had those who were clearly supposed to attend yesterday’s auction come here in such a state?

While Baron Willhem was unable to continue speaking, they disappeared into another area without even properly opening their eyes. A short while later, the soldiers who had imprisoned them returned. Only then did the Baron come to his senses and shake the bars again.

“Hey! Listen to me! Quickly release me! Don’t you know who I am? I am the master of the House, Baron Willhem!”

At that, the soldiers stopped. One soldier opened his mouth with a calm expression.

“If you wait a little longer, your turn will come. Others will arrive.”

“What? Wait? What do you mean, wait! Release me! Where is Duke Peletta, or rather, where is the Commander of the Tainu Knights! Why has no one come even though I’m here!”

The soldiers, looking down at his outburst, disappeared without even answering.

These people, living on the money he provided, how could this happen? He was shocked and shouted for them to come back, but their footsteps quickly faded into the distance. The Baron was left alone once more.

Something had definitely gone wrong.

Something was undoubtedly wrong, and the fact that he couldn’t even know what it was drove him mad.

The Baron clenched the bars with a desire to scream in anxiety.

It was an eternity later that he was led out of the prison by other soldiers.

“…Goodness. Your state is beyond words for just one night.”

Occupying a space within the security management team prepared for interrogation, Duke Peletta looked back at Baron Willhem and smiled a genuinely ominous and bright smile.

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Chapter 424

“You look quite weary. Would you like some wine?”

Baron Willhem eyed the glass that Kishiar offered and shook his head. His throat was parched, but it was more important to glean more information about the situation.

“That will be fine. But tell me, Duke, why am I imprisoned here?”

“I should be the one asking. Why were you here last night with the intruders when you should have been at the charity party?”

Kishiar inquired, tilting his head.

“Is it so strange for me, who manages Tainu, to be with the security management team? I only came here for urgent matters and happened to run into them.”

“Urgent matters, you say.”

Kishiar repeated Baron Willhem’s words.

“Is this related to the others that you supposedly rescued from the prison with your servant? I’ve heard that they were imprisoned there for a long time without any charges.”

The question referred to the ‘horses’ he had kept to sell as slaves. They were ones he would never have had to concern himself with had he managed to pass them on to the southern merchant properly.

‘Is that why he imprisoned me?’

Baron Willhem swallowed his dry saliva and used the excuse he had thought of while confined.

“You’re not saying that you believe those prisoners over me, who served His Highness the Duke and Cavalry with all my sincerity? They are criminals who tried to sneak into the Empire from other countries! I didn’t bring them out; they joined hands with the intruders to attempt escape. I almost died at their hands last night!”

How could one be thrown into prison without proper verification of facts from both sides? If this were known, the honor of the Cavalry would vanish like bubbles, and the Baron, spitting in his demand to clarify the responsibility, finally caught his breath.

Having listened to the Baron’s words, Kishiar asked as if to confirm,

“So you mean that you came here alone during the party, without notifying the Tainu Knights and the Cavalry, for urgent matters that have nothing to do with those claiming to have been imprisoned here or the intruders?”

“Yes.”

“So it was merely a coincidence that they attempted escape from the prison just when you were here, and the intruders came to help them?”

By now, one would have expected him to show signs of being shaken, but the smiling face of Duke Peletta, continually asking as if confirming something, didn’t change at all.

Baron Willhem felt an inexplicable sense of foreboding creeping up his nape at the Duke’s excessive composure.

“What exactly was this urgent matter that you were so concerned about?”

“That is… an internal secret of Tainu. I cannot disclose it without the Duke of Tainu’s permission.”

“Even if I say that I think I know the answer?”

Baron Willhem opened his mouth, intending to assert that the ambiguous question shouldn’t confuse him.

If Kishiar hadn’t started casually flipping through a stack of documents nearby, he would have been able to say so.

‘…What’s that?’

Seeing the writing on the front of the document, Baron Willhem turned pale and stopped speaking with his mouth agape.

If he wasn’t mistaken, it was undoubtedly the list prepared for the auction house.

He couldn’t fail to recognize it since he had personally checked and approved it. But how had that list fallen into the hands of Duke Peletta? How? Since when?

Kishiar’s eyes gently flickered open, seemingly feeling the blood-red gaze of Baron Willhem, who shuddered momentarily at the thought of the nobles of the Apeto family, carried unconscious into the dungeon.

“Right after you were captured here last night, there was an uproar involving intruders at the party hall and even in some of the old mansions nearby,” he said. “My loyal officers, who rushed there to maintain the peace of Tainu, witnessed some astonishing events. Prominent people from the West had gathered, innumerable in number, waiting for an illegal auction to defy the Empire’s law. Can you believe it?”

“Invaders at the party hall too? Are my family safe? What about the guests…?”

“Some unfortunately met their fate at the hands of the invaders, but luckily, your wife and daughters are safe. However, that’s not important.”

“Not important!”

Desperately trying to change the subject, but to no avail, Kishiar unfolded the bundle of papers in his hand again.

“I believe you came here last night for a reason closely related to what’s written in these documents. If my speculation is wrong, please correct me?”

Baron Willhem was unable to respond for a long time. Even his normally smooth cunning wouldn’t cooperate at this moment.

His head was spinning, and he felt a pounding headache. He just wanted to sit down, but there was no chair for him to sit on. Unfamiliar with the situation where he had only himself to rely on, Baron Willhem was at a loss.

‘I must absolutely deny it.’

That was the only thought in his mind.

Regardless of how much Duke Peletta knew, he had to keep it unrelated to Tain. Even if he failed in his task, the moment it was connected to Duke Tain, his life would be over.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t even know what’s written in those documents, let alone an auction?”

“Everyone present there mentioned your name. Still, you don’t know?”

“I know nothing about it.”

“This list details the names of those who prepared the auction. Your name isn’t there, but the name and approval seal of the Red Deer Consortium, connected to you, is stamped right at the top. Will you continue to claim ignorance?”

“The merchant group’s matter is something Graham took care of. I genuinely don’t know much about it. If there’s a problem with the merchant group, shouldn’t you arrest Graham first?”

“Hmm.”

Only then did Duke Peletta’s expression change slightly.

Come to think of it, he had mentioned that Baron Willhem’s wife and daughters were safe but hadn’t said anything about Graham Willhem, who had been weak-minded after almost being kidnapped by the Awakeners and was staying at the Baron’s mansion.

What had happened to him, entangled in all this? He might be dead. Even if he wasn’t, he was the only blood relative who worked closely with Baron Willhem and had deep connections to the Red Deer Consortium.

The moment he thought that, Baron Willhem’s mind sparked like lightning with the realization that his younger brother Graham was the best person to pass the blame onto. The Baron’s eyes, damp with sweat, sparkled.

“I took him in without question, thinking him unfortunate after suffering from the incident, but now that I think about it, it seemed like he was doing something secretive even from me lately.”

After insisting for a while that it was all to prepare for an illegal auction behind his brother’s back, Baron Willhem fired off his final words.

“I have never worked once for personal greed. If I had known that such a wicked act was happening in Tainu, I would have eradicated it already, if not for myself, then for His Grace, the Duke of Tain, who entrusted me with this place’s affairs.”

It was clear that someone had schemed all of this to happen precisely when he had hurriedly stepped in to take care of matters. And it was clear that his younger brother, Graham Willhem, was involved in this plot. The claims fit together all too well.

‘What’s more, the truth is the truth. I worked only for the Duke of Tain, and not for myself, so how could anyone lay blame on me?’

Though he felt a little sorry for his younger brother, the lives of himself and the Duke of Tain were the first things that needed to be considered. As it was a matter of business, if his younger brother were to take responsibility and claim the blame, the Duke of Tain would surely not ignore him.

For everyone’s sake, that was the best course.

“If you permit me, I will interrogate Graham myself and reveal the truth. That traitor who betrayed His Grace, the Duke of Tain…”

“…Is that so? What do you think?”

Baron Willhem paused at Kishiar’s question, which came just as he was in full flow. The door then opened, and there, being escorted by the soldiers, was his younger brother, Graham Willhem, the very one he was trying to pin the blame on.

The Baron swallowed his breath, noticing his brother’s swollen, glaring eyes fixed on him. A choked mutter escaped him.

“…Graham.”

“Along with the others at the auction house, your brother stood there at dawn, testifying that all of this happened because of your orders. I’m curious who’s lying here,” said Kishiar.

The Baron’s tongue seemed to have frozen in place.

Graham Willhem had been taken from his residence the previous night by the Cavalry and brought to a remote house. After receiving the exceptional healing power of Priest Lusan, he had somewhat regained his senses. The brothers, who now knew what had happened, had decided, mirror-like, to pin the blame on each other. Kishiar looked at the stony-faced brothers, whose faces were so alike, and sent them a friendly smile.

“It seems difficult to proceed with the investigation like this. I’ll give you some time, so discuss it well between you.”

From the prison, indeed. Duke Peletta smiled, and at the same time, the soldiers grabbed the arms of the two men. Baron Willhem screamed, his head lowered.

“Don’t think His Grace, the Duke of Tain, will overlook this absurdity!”

“Yes. I’m also looking forward to the Duke of Tain’s reaction when he hears this news.”

Kishiar answered calmly, smiling.

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Chapter 425

At that time, in the main residence of Duke Tain in the capital.

Normally, by this hour, the Duke of Tain would have already departed for the gambling den. However, he had not yet left his study. He paced around with an irritated expression, attempting to calm himself by sitting down and sipping tea, but his gaze never stopped wandering restlessly about the room.

There was only one reason for his anxiety: he had not received any word from the West, despite the fact that everything should have been settled by now.

Neither Baron Willhem nor the loyal southern merchants had sent any news. He had even summoned a mage to activate the magic communication device connected to the Willhem family, but no answer had returned. This was a first.

Though it had only been a day, it felt like an eternity had passed. Unable to bear the anxiety, the Duke eventually filled a short pipe, engraved with his family's crest, with tobacco. He was just about to light it when a moment came.

A heavy knocking, followed by a voice from outside, rang out.

"Your Grace, some visitors have arrived."

"Let them in at once!"

The Duke's eyes brightened momentarily at the news of a visitor but twisted into disappointment the moment he saw the people entering. They were not the ones he was waiting for.

“…Theorado? And others as well… What brings you here without notice at this hour?”

“Oh, Your Grace, it seems you were expecting someone else? The butler did not mention… If you’re busy, perhaps it’s better to meet another time?”

An elderly man standing next to Theorado, the Commander of the Imperial Knights, asked in a seemingly gentle voice. He was a distant relative of the Duke of Tain and had served alongside the previous Duke, making him a person not to be trifled with. The man had been retired, living in a southern villa, and it was unclear when he had arrived.

Along with the old man, all those accompanying Theorado were members of the Tain family.

Why had so many of them suddenly gathered here all at once?

A bad premonition came to him, but the Duke nodded for now.

“No… no, it’s fine. Come in.”

With his permission, over a dozen people entered the study. At the end of the line, the Duke spotted two familiar yet foreign faces after a very long time.

A young man and woman with red hair resembling the Duke’s greeted him with an elegant bow.

“Hello, Father.”

“Pruelle, Priscilla? What brings you two here?”

“You’re speaking strangely. Are we not allowed to visit the main residence?”

Pruelle answered with an impeccable smile.

Though they lived in the capital, the Duke of Tain and his children did not share a home. Living separately in another mansion in the 3rd District, their sudden arrival with other members of the Tain family was nothing if not strange.

The Duke of Tain turned his head toward Theorado and the others, his eyes filled with suspicion and wariness.

“Your Grace, we have come here today to hear your response to certain voices within the family, claiming that over the past few years, you have been deceived by foreign swindlers, plunging our family’s prestige and financial state into serious crisis.”

The old man who met the Duke’s eyes answered quietly.

“At first, we hoped it was merely a rumor. However, upon investigation, we found that indeed, over half of the Tain family’s most significant assets have been pledged or already disposed of without consent, either held as collateral or already sold off.”

The elite knights who were supposed to work for the family were mostly tied down in meaningless places for the Duke’s business, rather than in the west where monsters were likely to appear. Moreover, many of those who had managed the family’s fortune for generations had suddenly been driven away within a few years. Endless stories of the Duke’s arbitrary actions flowed from the old man’s lips.

“What do you think of this?”

“This insolence! How dare you pry into what I, the master of the family, am doing?”

The Duke retorted sharply.

“This is absurd. I don’t know whose words you’ve been listening to, but if you’ve come to dispute my business, leave at once!”

“Is that the only answer you will give?”

“Answer or not, why should I endure such an insult from you? Were these the words of those who were driven away? Theorado, I am greatly disappointed if you, who should know the situation, have also believed and joined them. Was it you who brought the children?”

Theorado did not respond. Instead, another stepped forward, letting out a dry laugh.

“Ha ha, it wasn’t anyone who brought them. Quite the opposite. They informed us of this fact and gathered us themselves.”

“…Who, gathered?”

The Duke asked, doubting his own ears.

“I trust that the master of the Tain family will not be unaware of the family’s traditions and laws. If it is judged that Your Grace, the Duke, has fallen into a physical and mental state too dire to function, those with the qualifications of the heir can summon us.”

“And today, a meeting will be held here to decide the second child, Princess Priscilla as the next heir.”

“…What?”

At the consecutive words, the Duke was at a loss for words. His gaze, filled with anger, turned towards Pruelle and his daughter Priscilla standing beside her brother. His furious eyes scanned the unfamiliar faces of his children.

“What nonsense is this, to hold a meeting I’ve neither heard of nor agreed to? What do you think you’re doing?”

“We know what we need to, Father.”

Pruelle calmly replied.

“And we also know that the answer you’re waiting for from the west will never arrive. Everyone knows, not just me.”

Pruelle smiled gently, patting his younger sister’s shoulder. Priscilla, her long red hair neatly tied, looked defiantly at her father.

“You’re insane, Pruelle. What on earth are you talking about!”

“I’m not the insane one, perhaps it’s you, Father. Have you forgotten that I recently visited the west? Thinking of what I saw there, I still find it hard to hide my sorrow at how you’ve become this way.”

At the sight of his smiling son, the Duke’s heart raced wildly. For the first time, he realized that his children were not the small, insignificant creatures he had perceived them to be.

A son who had grown taller than his father, and a daughter who had learned to give a chilling stare.

All that he thought he knew was overturned in an instant, and cold sweat ran down his back. The Duke breathed heavily, clutching his chest.

Then, the sound of knocking came again. Without waiting for an answer, those who entered were the Emperor’s direct guards, who had not left the Sun Palace for years. Following them were others in unfamiliar black uniforms.

Unlike the bewildered Duke, the others merely looked at the intruders with indifferent faces, as if they had known all along that they would come.

“Your Highness, Duke Tain. This is the imperial edict sent by His Majesty the Emperor.”

Duke Tain had unfolded the paper with trembling hands.

Contained within was a brief and succinct command that read: “Information has been obtained that an Awakener from the southern countries, seeking to disturb the Empire, have conspired with Duke Tain. As we intend to send a Cavalry member possessing the authority to investigate matters related to the Awakener, do not obstruct them.”

The time for executing the command was specified as the moment Duke Tain had confirmed it.

“Awakener? Who on earth is this Awakener?”

“If you have verified it, I will accept the command.”

As the Duke’s mumbling fell, the Imperial Guards quickly bowed, gesturing towards the men dressed in black uniforms.

“Your Highness, Duke Tain. I am Deputy Commander Steiber Rendley of the Cavalry. From now on, I will receive the orders of His Majesty the Emperor and the Commander and momentarily escort your honorable personage. Please forgive the intrusion.”

A middle-aged man who was smiling kindly stepped forward and greeted him.

“I did not permit this. Who exactly is the Awakener, and who is investigating me? Stop these guys right now, Theorado! Theo!”

The Duke’s voice, calling Theorado’s name frantically, echoed and dispersed throughout the vast mansion.

But there was no one who came running to his aid.

…

“Have you finished all the investigations?”

“Yeah. As expected, there wasn’t much valuable information, so it ended quickly.”

Yuder looked at Kishiar’s face, who had returned from the security management team sooner than expected. The day after everything was overturned, they had a busier day than anyone else.

While Kishiar had summoned and interrogated the nobles brought in by the security management team, Yuder had examined the laborers brought by the Star of Nagran and the southern merchants. The laborers had little information about the southern merchants, so the gains were scant, but the case with the Star of Nagran was slightly different.

It was a significant harvest, as they were able to properly confront Hosanna, the teleporter who had been troubling them for so long.

‘Even though it was only in his sleeping form.’

Hosanna had been shocked to see the transformed appearance of Finn Eldore, who had secretly sneaked into the bed in place of Graham Willhem, whom he tried to kill, and had fallen in a faint. It was good that he was easily subdued in the opportunity, but the sleeping potion that Finn had drugged him with had been too much, and he was still unconscious.

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Chapter 426

“The fact that his condition has worsened due to using his ability many times in a short time to fight Nathan Zuckerman alone must have also contributed to his long fainting.”

After examining Hosanna with Lusan and Enon, Yuder determined that it seemed Hosanna would have difficulty using his abilities properly for some time. Teleportation ability was notoriously tricky to use compared to others, and it was a natural consequence since he had recklessly used such an ability beyond what his body could handle.

Nevertheless, in case he woke up and attempted to escape, Yuder asked that those guarding Hosanna’s side must tie his wrist together with theirs using a rope.

Based on what he had seen and heard so far, Hosanna needed close contact with others to use his teleportation ability. And judging by the tendencies of teleportation ability users Yuder had met in his previous life, this meant that those in contact with Hosanna when he used his ability were highly likely to move along with him, even without the user’s consent.

Teleportation ability users generally said that the power required increased exponentially as the number of people being transported and the distance grew.

No matter how extraordinary and rare Hosanna’s ability was at this time, it would be impossible to attempt to escape to a distant place while connected to someone else.

“It would be great if Kanna could find a better way… but this is the best we can do for now.”

In his previous life, mages commissioned by Emperor Katchian had succeeded in altering the structure of the Knight-suppression device and the Mage-suppression device to create an Awakener-suppression device. It had happened not long after Emperor Katchian had started giving Yuder secret missions.

Though it didn't work well on Yuder for the test, making the Emperor dissatisfied with the result, he had heard that the original suppression devices were almost ineffective against very strong individuals. Nevertheless, having such a device would have been helpful in suppressing without straining the body in a situation like this.

'Why didn't I pay more attention to how and who made it back then?'

The regret was not only about that. Although most of this incident had gone as planned, there were still overlooked aspects.

Whether it was Nathan Zuckerman's emitted swordmaster aura, making Nahan fall from the third floor and yet successfully escape, the southern merchants whose hidden intentions seemed not so good, or the innocent people and property damage during the process, they all contributed to a reason why he couldn't simply feel relieved by the success in catching Duke Tain and Baron Willhem.

"And… this kind of thing will continue."

The southern merchants and Nahan were all people who existed in his previous life. The fact that they had started to show different behaviors was probably because the Cavalry and Yuder had changed first, and thus met them.

The small changes that occurred from just one person's transformation were gradually extending and connecting to places beyond his knowledge.

There might be more things happening now that did not occur back then. To prepare for that, he needed to understand and act upon more possibilities.

Faster than before. In a way different from up to now…

“What are you thinking about so much?”

At that moment, Kishiar, who had taken off his coat, gently asked. His eyes scanned Yuder’s eyelashes, which had just fluttered away from his deep thoughts.

“I was just thinking about this incident for a moment.”

“I heard the news that someone spread a rumor today that we had been in the lounge all night during the party. Could it be about that?”

At the unexpected question, Yuder was momentarily unable to respond quickly.

Before going to see the members of the Star of Nagran today, Yuder had carried out the task of nailing upside down on the gate of Baron Willhem’s mansion the knight who had maliciously expelled Kanna.

That man had shouted that rumor loudly and furiously at that time, but Yuder had long since pushed it out of his mind, not caring about it in the slightest, as he naturally did not find those words unpleasant.

“No, it’s not that. But how did you know?”

Kishiar had surely gone to the security management team much earlier than Yuder, so it was puzzling how he knew about the trivial event that had occurred here today.

“On my way here, I couldn’t help but hear how diligently others were talking about it.”

“I see.”

“If not, so be it. So, what have you been thinking about, Assistant?”

Yuder blinked several times and answered slowly.

“Just what kind of response we should prepare if such a task arises again… I was just thinking about such things for a moment.”

“Interesting. I’d like to hear what response you think is necessary.”

“It wasn’t anything extraordinary.”

“If it’s not extraordinary, then you can talk about it more comfortably, right?”

Kishiar’s articulate way of expressing his desire to achieve something was indeed very characteristic of him.

‘Anyway, these were things I was going to propose to Kishiar once I organized my thoughts, so it doesn’t really matter if I do it now.’

Yuder let out a small sigh and opened his mouth.

“Commander, what do you think about possibly creating a branch of the Cavalry?”

“A branch?”

“Yes. I’ve heard that the larger knight orders create regional branches. If there were regional branches within the Cavalry,

wouldn’t we be able to identify and help those in trouble, like the Star of Nagran we met this time, who had to flee their hometown?”

He spoke as if it was just an idea, but it was something he had actually done in his previous life.

In his previous life, Kishiar had left some western-born members behind for cleanup after the western incident was almost settled. Before stepping down from his position as Commander, he had promoted the place to the first Cavalry branch, which became the prototype for many branches that later spread like a spider’s web throughout the country.

The Cavalry’s early possession of national Awakener management, which was the envy of other countries, was due in part to the flawless branch system that Kishiar had originally created.

Perhaps the current Kishiar was already thinking of creating such branches.

Yuder slowly rubbed his lips and stared at the man’s face, lost in thought.

Soon, the awaited answer flowed from Kishiar’s mouth.

“It’s interesting. In fact, I had thought about making something similar since I created the Cavalry. No, originally, I had intended to recruit regionally.”

“Is that so?”

The fact that even the Assistant didn’t know surprised Kishiar, who wore a bitter yet playful smile.

“Yes. But I kept running into opposition and couldn’t achieve my goal. Eventually, I had to agree to a compromise to establish a small

unit in the capital first, show its performance, and then negotiate again. I also couldn't completely control the recruitment process."

"I didn't know."

Yuder's entry exam into the cavalry was a part of that, with Kishiar disguised and accompanying as an examiner only in the second round. His face, telling that it wasn't merely a scheme to observe people more comfortably by pretending not to be the Commander, briefly showed some old emotions before they disappeared.

"But now, we might be able to renegotiate. Originally, I had planned to return to the capital and expedite the second phase of recruitment by initiating regional enlistment, but perhaps, as my assistant suggested, it might be good to establish a branch here first."

"Is that really so?"

Kishiar's decision had come surprisingly quickly, considering that Yuder had thought there would be time to contemplate the suggestion. Furthermore, Kishiar even considered moving up the second phase of recruitment. Yuder stammered a question, to which Kishiar nodded.

"Since we're discussing this, shall we start immediately tomorrow? It might be far better to create a branch and leave them behind to investigate the ones we've arrested here, such as the Star of Nagran and others, instead of taking them to the capital. It's true for them and us alike. Ah, of course, we must take Hosanna with us."

"Where do you think we should place it?"

"The head of the security management team, the Tainu Knights' Commander, will be vacating his place soon. The temporary

headquarters are there, so there's no need to prepare from scratch. It's perfect. In these matters, being the first is crucial."

Kishiar said, smiling brightly. Commander Jeymer Phil, who had seen the Cavalry as a thorn in his side for years, was about to be dismissed and stand trial soon. Many of his crimes, committed under the command of Baron Willhem over the years, had been exposed.

"It looks good, but… Wouldn't people in the West be against it?"

"The last person I met today was Lord Koelt. When I subtly asked him, he seemed to think that he wouldn't refuse the return to the family that governs Tainu."

Public opinion can easily change depending on who's in charge. While the Willhem family was in power, those who agreed with them prospered, but if the Koelt family took charge, those who had been silent would surely come forward with their opinions.

"That's fortunate."

"It is. If so, we might be able to return sooner than planned…"

Kishiar, with a joyful face, was about to further explain the plan when he suddenly turned his head towards the window. Small birds flying from the darkness tapped on the window with their beaks, announcing their presence.

"Messages from the capital."

A man opened the door, and the birds perched on his fingers as he returned. One of the birds was quite familiar to Yuder's eyes. It was sent from the cavalry.

After making the birds chirping for water sit near the cup, Kishiar took out the letters. After several steps, he broke the seals and

quickly read the content. His face, serene as he read the letter from the Cavalry, changed instantly as he read the second one.

“Commander?”

“It appears that we must not merely return sooner, but absolutely must do so.”

“What happened?”

Kishiar’s eyes, holding the letter in his hand, darkened immeasurably.

“His Majesty has collapsed.”

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Chapter 427

“Does His Majesty the Emperor… speak?”

“Yes. It seems he suddenly collapsed due to a chronic illness and only opened his eyes after half a day.”

A complex emotion flickered in Yuder’s eyes. The feeling was that the time had come, as only a few months were left until Emperor Keilusa’s departure from the world in his previous life, due to the worsening of his chronic illness.

But on the other hand, he was not pleased. Even Gakane who would have died in the west if things had been the same as before, and all the other Cavalry members, were alive and well in this life. Despite so much change, could the death of Emperor Keilusa be the only thing that remained unchanged?

‘If the death had been caused by an assassination attempt or another factor that could have been resolved in advance, it would have already been resolved.’

“…That’s what will be announced to the public, but it’s a bit different for those who know the situation.”

Yuder, who had been lost in thought, raised his eyes that were cast downward due to Kishiar’s sudden reversal of his previous statement.

“Yes?”

“Do you remember me saying that His Majesty’s chronic illness is similar to the reason why I had no choice but to be known as a sick person to the outside world until I became an Awakener?”

Did he remember the conversation they had before? The red pupils calmly asked. Yuder, looking into those eyes, suddenly opened his mouth to a speculation that had briefly crossed his mind.

“Could it be that His Majesty the Emperor’s condition has worsened…?”

“…I can’t know. Not yet.”

Emperor Keilusa was heading towards his end day by day due to the vessel problem, just like Kishiar had before. Kishiar had supported Thais Yulman’s research, hoping that the power of the Red Stone would help the Emperor, but he had not yet heard any other news about it.

Was it possible that the news of his collapse was not bad?

Kishiar looked down at the letter once again. A deep and unfathomable shadow lingered on his face, from which his usual armor-like smile had vanished.

“I think I’ll have to have a drink and go to sleep tonight. Will you join me and listen?”

Yuder thought he had seen various sides of Kishiar, but this expression was a first. After a moment of hesitation, he cautiously replied.

“Could I listen?”

“Of course. There’s no conversation that an assistant shouldn’t hear. If it’s burdensome to stay by my side, you can leave.”

“That’s not the case.”

Kishiar’s eyes finally twinkled at the firm denial.

“…All right. Then listen to my stories and be my drinking partner as well.”

He promptly called for a servant to bring the wine. Only a heavy silence flowed between the two until the bottle and glasses arrived. Kishiar poured the transparent strong liquor into the glass himself, gulped it all down, and neatly set it aside. To an unknowing eye, it would not have seemed strange to mistake the drink for water.

The only sign that revealed he had drunk a painful, potent liquor was his eyes, which began to flicker like a lampshade that had just blocked a flame.

“Now, a glass for my assistant.”

Yuder swallowed the glass that Kishiar had poured for him as if it were water. In his case, it was really no different from water, but Kishiar laughed heartily.

“You didn’t have to follow me. Is your stomach not hurting?”

“I’m fine.”

“Does this amount of alcohol fall within the range where my assistant doesn’t get drunk?”

“…Yes.”

“Then it’s good.”

The two drank several more glasses back and forth. Despite drinking from small glasses, they soon finished a bottle.

It was when Kishiar had opened the second bottle and taken the first sip that he began to speak.

“His Majesty has always been more robust than me. Many have said that you could live a long life if you didn’t overexert yourself. But

that His Majesty should come to this state is not a natural result of the power outgrowing the vessel, as happened to me.”

Then why has it come to this now?

Kishiar, meeting Yuder’s gaze, lifted the corners of his lips coolly.

“His Majesty and I think it’s the nobles’ trickery.”

“You think…?”

“There’s no remaining evidence, that’s why.”

“…”

“His Majesty originally knew that it was difficult to have a successor, so he was thinking of adopting one. He wanted to appoint a child, personally favored from the distant relatives of the imperial family, excluding the nobility, as the Crown Prince.”

Kishiar paused for a moment before speaking again.

“But the nobles argued that it was unreasonable and that the most qualified person should be chosen through fair competition to gain everyone’s approval.”

And so, for the first time, an unprecedented situation arose where the position of Crown Prince was contested, with each noble family and the imperial family’s relatives putting forth candidates. The Emperor finally consented only after securing a promise that no one would object if the Emperor’s side’s candidate won.

The candidates for the Crown Prince fought fiercely through several tests. The battles, bolstered by the strength of each family, sometimes escalated into life-threatening dangers.

Then, one day, during a hunting competition attended by all Crown Prince candidates, a serious carriage overturning accident

occurred.

“It was clearly an accident targeting the candidate chosen by His Majesty. But the incident escalated as even His Majesty’s carriage got caught up in it.”

Under normal circumstances, it would have been a fatal accident. But the Emperor, in a desperate moment, exerted all his power for the first time to save himself and the Empress. As a result, both survived unscathed, but the candidate that Emperor Keilusa had wanted to adopt as his heir died.

And the Emperor’s vessel also suffered damage.

“As you know, after that, the current Crown Prince and the Diarca family seized victory and took their place.”

Those who caused the accident might not have known the ongoing vessel issue in the imperial family, but ultimately, they achieved great success since the Emperor became confined and unable to go outside.

“I was in Peletta at the time, so I didn’t fully understand the situation. Only after I became an Awakener and healed did I learn the strange reason His Majesty was confined, citing a strange disease.”

The Emperor’s not being able to work outside was almost impossible, yet there was no other way. Now that Katchian, the candidate from the Diarca family, had become Crown Prince, even inside the imperial palace, they couldn’t be careless.

At that time, Kishiar, having become an Awakener and appearing healthy, was like a lost hope returning to them.

“I told you before. Just as the power of the Red Stone saved me, I thought it could also help His Majesty’s vessel. In a way, the rapid

changes in the world due to the presence of Awakeners could be a good opportunity.”

Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar, while protecting and investigating the Red Stone, dreamed once again of achieving their goals in a changing world.

“Do you remember the magic stones medium, with power separated from the Red Stone, that Thais Yulman had created? I handed them over to His Majesty.”

As close as one was to the power of the Red Stone, and the more one was exposed to it, the higher the likelihood of becoming an Awakener. Thus, it was necessary to create an environment where the same miracle could happen to Emperor Keilusa. Therefore, he had requested that most of the stone, except for the amount needed for research, be placed in the Emperor’s room and never be kept far away.

What returned even before a proper result could be confirmed was a letter reporting that the Emperor had collapsed.

“… His Majesty has an incredibly strong patience. Even amid the immense pain of the gradually crumbling vessel.”

Did this mean that a limit was approaching, now that he had collapsed?

Kishiar drank another glass of liquor, his face solemn.

“The likelihood that the gift I sent didn’t take effect is high… But just because he has collapsed once doesn’t mean everything is over yet. Although my heart is heavy, I want to think that way until I return and check it myself.”

Silence flowed once more. Yuder looked down at the liquor before him and slowly opened his mouth.

“Commander, you’ve gone through the same process as His Majesty.”

Kishiar’s hand paused.

“…Yes. I did.”

“How much time do you think is left then, in your view?”

It was a frank and bold question. But there was no cleverness in Yuder to ask it indirectly.

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Kishiar had once said that it took around five years to determine that the vessel had reached its limits after sustaining damage. Emperor Keilusa had predicted a shorter time, and although he had eventually collapsed, it wasn't the end of everything.

Kishiar tilted his head, staring into a pair of deep, dark eyes that looked straight ahead.

"Is something on your mind?"

"It's difficult to say for sure at the moment. However, if there's still time, I'd like to find a way."

Kishiar wasn't fond of uncertainty, but this time he had no choice.

The man who could easily laugh and talk when discussing the secrets he himself hid was now not smiling at all. News about one's only family obviously held a different weight, even for a man who wouldn't blink in the face of ordinary calamities.

Just moments ago, Yuder had considered simply letting Emperor Keilusa die, but from the moment he realized this, he changed his mind.

Kishiar hadn't changed his belief that the power of the Red Stone could solve the issue with the vessel. In that case, Yuder couldn't give up on this matter either.

'I don't know the progress on the research into the power of the Red Stone, but there have been significant developments related to it for me. If the power of the Red Stone can help… maybe there's a chance I can intervene.'

Noticing the change in Yuder’s eyes, Kishiar’s expression also subtly altered. Words were unnecessary as countless meanings came and went in the locked gaze they shared.

“You’re thinking of something dangerous, aren’t you?”

“Isn’t it a situation where you have to find any means necessary?”

“The reason I brought this up wasn’t to rope in assistance.”

“Then it’s already too late.”

Yuder answered quietly, yet resolutely.

“So, how much time do you think we have left?”

“…”

A long breath escaped between Kishiar’s parted lips. He looked like a man at a loss for words. Yet his gaze was still fixed on Yuder as if entranced, eventually giving way to a thin, uncontrollable laughter.

What he was laughing about, Yuder couldn’t tell, but he stubbornly waited for an answer.

Finally, a clear voice responded.

“If the damage to the vessel has reached its limit and convulsions and fainting begin, the one who lasted the longest among the precedents managed to endure for about six months.”

Six months. About half a year from now. Emperor Keilusa of a previous life seemed to have left the world before that time too. Yuder, recalling the memories, asked again.

“What was the shortest duration then?”

“They didn’t last even a month.”

Six months and less than a month. Both were less than a year, but the difference was substantial.

If the Red Stone’s power-infused magic stone that Kishiar had sent to Emperor Keilusa indeed had no effect, and if Yuder could not find any method in the future, then he would die again within that period.

‘I’m not sure how the variables will play out, but I guess I can assume that there’s time until everything was originally supposed to end in the West.’

Yuder’s mind began to turn rapidly. He threw another question to gather as much information as possible.

“Who was the person that endured for six months?”

Wondering if there might have been some special reason why the one who endured longer could do so, Yuder asked, and a perplexed smile floated across Kishiar’s face.

“Hmm, to tell the truth, it’s me.”

“You?”

“After enduring about 6 months, I sensed the end and became like this, so it might be hard to consider it a proper count.”

“…”

Kishiar was the one who had endured the pain for the longest time.

A feeling of indescribable frustration found its way into Yuder’s heart at that moment.

In his previous life, he would have experienced this pain not once, but twice. It was entirely unimaginable since there had never been a single instance where he had fainted or had a seizure, but that must have been the case.

He could not even slightly understand what state of mind that would require, and it stirred up an unknown turbulent wave within Yuder's heart.

"You don't need to worry about it now," Kishiar said, reaching out and tousling Yuder's bangs, interpreting Yuder's pale, expressionless face. Yuder closed his eyes at the touch and then opened them, regaining control of his emotions.

'…Right.'

It hasn't happened now.

So it was right to think of more important things first.

"So, now that you have the answer, will you tell me what dangerous thoughts my assistant is having?"

"Before coming to the west, didn't I see and touch the energy inside your body, Commander?"

Not merely touching, he had also eliminated some of the tangled forces within. Afterwards, Kishiar unintentionally received the fortune of the impending 'cycle' and heat period suddenly receding.

Although the same thing had not happened since, Yuder had been able to discern more about the powers absorbed into his body as he went through various incidents in the west.

These experiences gave him some confidence in what he was about to say.

“If you permit me, I intend to try to cause the same thing to happen again.”

“…”

Kishiar did not respond immediately.

After a long silence, his eyes, which had been scanning Yuder’s face, finally went down to the hand covered in gloves.

“That… I remember we decided not to try again until we knew more about what happened that time. Didn’t we? Do you now have confidence to intentionally cause that again?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“It’s difficult to assure you with certainty, but it’s different from that time. The moment when I completely expelled the toxicity remaining in the body, I felt that perhaps I could accomplish the same thing again.”

He remembered the feeling when the activated power boiled like flames and something remaining in his body was burning vividly after taking the medicine made by Enon. He had never before experienced something so faint becoming so clear.

If he could grasp and bring it out again.

Yuder explained the sensations he had felt and his assumptions about the change in power as positively as possible. Kishiar listened quietly in silence.

A while later, his answer was not entirely negative.

“If it’s as you say, you might be able to achieve good results.”

“Then…”

“But it’s still difficult to be sure that the same result as my time will come, even if the same thing happens again. A single attempt can go wrong, or you might get hurt.”

He knew that. But wasn’t it better than not trying at all? He was about to say just that when—

“…So let me test it first.”

“Yes?”

At the unexpected words, he questioned, and Kishiar calmly replied.

“I was in a condition similar to His Majesty’s, and to some extent, it’s still true. Therefore, if you first try it on me and succeed again, the chances of failure will be reduced, won’t they?”

It was a valid argument. If he could actually try the same thing again, there were also thoughts of dealing with Kishiar’s vessel problem.

But strangely enough, the acceptance did not come easily as he looked at Kishiar’s face, confidently telling him to practice on him without hesitation. The man who saw Yuder’s hesitation gave a sweet smile and shook his head.

“Did you propose a method you’re not even confident to try? If that’s the case, I can’t accept it.”

“…No. If you cooperate, of course, I will try it.”

“Good, I like that.”

Kishiar put down his half-empty glass of alcohol.

“First, this letter was sent by someone other than His Majesty for situation reporting, so I plan to wait for the next letter from His Majesty and then decide when to move. When will you start the trial?”

“It’s difficult right now. After I understand it a bit more… Would it be alright to tell you around tomorrow night?”

“That’s fine.”

Kishiar’s expression was fresh, but on the contrary, Yuder felt a slight weight on his shoulders. He had another drink of alcohol instead of water, and then glanced at the two letters in front of Kishiar. He knew all the contents of the letter from the imperial palace, but he didn’t yet know what news was in the letter from the Cavalry.

“By the way, what was the content of the letter from the Cavalry?”

“Ah, this one? It’s a report that the capital is in an uproar because Duke Tain has been summoned for investigation related to this incident. The gambling houses he frequented also seem to have closed down one after another thanks to this.”

“It has spread that far already.”

“It’s the result of many people working hard there.”

How many people must have worked behind the scenes for this result? Yuder thought of the Cavalry members who would have been sweating in the capital and the Great Sarain Forest, and Pruelle, who might be finishing up in the capital and returning by now.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door and called for Kishiar.

“Commander, are you there? There’s an urgent contact from the security management team.”

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“What’s going on?”

As soon as he got permission, Emun opened the door and stepped inside, pausing for a moment when he saw the alcohol placed in front of Kishiar and Yuder. But he quickly averted his eyes and spoke his purpose.

“Ever has requested you to come to the underground dungeon’s 4th floor immediately. She said you would understand if she just said that much…”

“Understood. Prepare the carriage and tell Kanna to come. You can fill Kanna’s place for a while.”

After Emun hurriedly left, Kishiar stood up, his face showing no sign of intoxication. Yuder got up and followed him, asking curiously.

“The 4th floor of the dungeon, you say? Is there a reason to call Kanna as well?”

“We’ll talk about it on the way.”

Kanna, who had been observing the Star of Nagran Awakeners, quickly joined them and got into the carriage. She too wore a puzzled expression, not knowing why she had been summoned.

During the swift journey through the darkness, Kishiar finally explained to the two who were in the dark.

“While investigating the nobles today, I requested a bit of cooperation from Baron Koelt. It seems that the Koelt family still has information about the underground dungeon’s 4th floor.”

Once upon a time, the current Baron Koelt, who had done much in the name of Duke Tain and was almost as famous as the Willhem family, still possessed much valuable information.

Although he had fallen from grace, he was a well-known historian. He showed great interest in the story of the 4th floor of the dungeon that Kishiar subtly brought up. He had heard it as an old tale from his grandfather but never expected it to exist.

He was also from the Duke of Tain's family, so he was fully qualified to open the 4th floor of the dungeon. There could be no better person to investigate than the new caretaker of the West.

"So I ordered him to head to the underground dungeon's 4th floor with Ever as soon as the investigation ended. If they found anything inside, I told them to send word, but they sent someone quicker than I thought."

Through Kishiar's explanation, Kanna, who seemed quite interested in the new Baron even before meeting him, found out that he was also the informant who had secretly passed information to Pruelle, the one who stayed with Kishiar until the end of the party to protect him.

"I don't know either Tain's 1st Duke or him, but I've seen their names often in the information I've read since coming here. I wonder what they found there."

"We'll find out soon."

The front of the security management team building was bright as day, with many lights lit. While Kishiar was finding him and conversing with the startled members that there was no big problem and they should continue with their work, Kanna, who had been by Yuder's side, suddenly spoke with a hesitant face.

"Yuder. Do you, by chance, have any concerns?"

“No. Why?”

“Just from the carriage… I felt you were more than usual. If you don’t want to answer, you can ignore it.”

Though he did feel down due to news of Emperor Keilusa and the trial with Kishiar that he must attempt tomorrow, he had not intended to show it. But it seemed to have been futile before Kanna’s greatly enhanced abilities.

Yuder glanced at Kanna’s kind blue eyes, which seemed to worry whether he might be upset, and shook his head slightly.

“It’s okay. Thank you.”

“Mmm. But if you ever need my help, you know you can ask, right?”

Kishiar and the condition of the Emperor’s body were confidential, making it genuinely difficult to ask for help, but the sincerity Kanna felt from Yuder lightened his mood somewhat.

They began to descend towards the third floor of the underground dungeon. The wide dungeon was packed with prisoners, and the cacophony from their individual wailing was almost unbearable.

Fortunately, the third floor, which confined serious criminals, was much quieter. Of course, that was until they discovered two people separated and imprisoned in cells with barred partitions.

“How dare you betray me! Without your nonsense, I wouldn’t have been trapped here!”

“Is it only to that extent that you’ve gone mad, brother? I will not forget what a heinous act you committed, and I will report it in detail to Duke Tain, so please know that!”

“Do you think Duke Tain will believe your words?”

“Silence. The Duke’s trust was more with me. He even bestowed this brooch upon me and trusts me over you, a mere Baron. How dare you doubt his intentions?”

“You’re making a fuss over just a brooch? How many times has he lamented your stupidity to me and asked me to monitor your handling of matters…!”

Kanna, upon seeing Baron Willhem and his sibling squabbling incessantly inside the bars, tightened her facial muscles and bit her lips.

“Um, hmm. You seem very busy.”

“It’s more accurate to say they’re busy with their mouths. Let’s move on; it’s too noisy.”

Kishiar smoothly replied, turning away from the scene. Beyond the iron bars, the two disheveled men who had clawed at each other several times drifted further away.

“Commander, you’ve arrived.”

“I greet you, Your Grace.”

At the end of the third floor of the underground dungeon, where the hidden entrance to the fourth floor existed, Ever and Baron Koelt awaited, expressing both joy and tension as they greeted them. Yuder exchanged brief eye contact with Ever and then observed Baron Koelt talking with Kishiar, suddenly taken aback.

‘That person is…?’

He had heard stories since yesterday, but this was the first time he had seen his face. A vague memory from a previous life surfaced

as soon as he saw him.

‘Yes, I’m sure. He was the one who almost uniquely showed kindness during the Western mission.’

In the collapsing Western region, where even Baron Willhem of Tainu fled, a barren place where no one welcomed or helped the Cavalry, there was a man who happened to meet them and showed kindness.

He was leading several people in flight, and Yuder was heading into the village they had fled from to subdue monsters. Unlike others who avoided the Cavalry, the man had provided a suitable place to rest and shared information about the terrain, then departed.

And what Yuder found after clearing the monsters occupying the village was the man’s party, annihilated by another swarm of monsters not far from their first meeting place.

‘Back then, he looked so miserable that I never thought he could be a noble.’

Their brief encounter lasted just a few minutes, and Yuder had assumed the man to be merely a village chief leading his people from danger. The realization that the man was a Baron, and that they would meet again in this way, was even more astonishing.

Yuder resolved to believe in his humanity even more firmly and quickly than when Kishiar had taken an interest in Baron Koelt and told him his story.

“What did you discover that you contacted us so urgently, Baron Koelt?”

“I believe I’ve found a clue that can shed light on the actual purpose and history of the fourth floor of the prison, so I took the

liberty of contacting you. It would be easier for you to understand if you go down and see it for yourself.”

Unlike in his previous life, the perfectly healthy Baron Koelt was a person who felt very scholarly, with a neat and upright impression. Through his glasses, his eyes shone, and from his flawless posture, a rigid character was clearly felt.

In front of Kishiar, he did not overly humble himself; conversely, he did not act as if he was higher in front of Ever, Yuder, or Kanna either.

“Alright. Let’s go down.”

As soon as Kishiar nodded his head, Baron Koelt stood in front of a wall engraved with Tain Duchy’s insignia and placed his palm against it. Thanks to the still-unhealed wound from a previous cut, the floor and wall soon shifted, revealing the way down to the fourth floor.

‘That place…’

As everyone naturally followed the moving staircase down, the door closed behind them. Ever, holding a lantern, led the way.

“It looks… different from the upper floors.”

Finally stepping onto the fourth floor, Kanna looked around and muttered softly. Indeed, the fourth floor of the prison looked similar to the upper floors but was somehow different. First, the bars covering the cells were not black iron but white stone, and the ceiling was much lower.

Inside each cell on the floor, there was a large magic circle, aged and mysterious. This was evidently where the victims of human trafficking had been held.

‘They said they could almost live without eating or drinking in there…’

“There’s an empty space ahead. It looks like nothing is there, but I searched around, thinking that there must be something.”

Baron Koelt opened his mouth in a serious tone.

“And I discovered an insignia on one wall, similar to the entrance above. When I smeared blood on it…”

As he spoke, the previously empty space revealed itself just as he had described. Only now, one wall had opened, and another space inside had newly exposed itself.

“A researcher’s lab has been revealed.”

“A research lab?”

“Yes. It’s definitely an old mage’s research lab.”

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Chapter 430

If there were anyone worthy of being the owner of this laboratory, it would likely be the first Duke Tain.

According to what Pruelle and Kishiar had shared earlier, the first Duke Tain was a disciple of Archmage Luma, just like his brothers. Luma often visited him in Tainu, and even though he might not have recognized his disciple's talent, he had acknowledged his research abilities.

There were also speculations about his research content, which was now unknown. Even though its nature was not clear, it was presumed dangerous, so it was thought to have been hidden.

However, even after the existence of the fourth floor was revealed, no such space was found inside.

Since saving those trapped there and capturing Baron Willhem had been the priority, Yuder had postponed thoughts about this particular matter.

Had the time finally come to verify the answer?

As Yuder's gaze surreptitiously shifted toward Kishiar, Kishiar, too, looked back at him with a significant expression. From a small nod, it was felt that they were thinking the same thing.

They finally entered the opened laboratory.

And they encountered an unexpected sight.

'…Just discarded bags? Where is anything that would suggest a laboratory?'

The place was not very spacious. The walls inside, carved out like a dark cave, were filled with various patterns, but that was all. On the otherwise empty floor, old worn-out cloth bags were scattered about.

What, then, had made him decide this was a mage's laboratory?

Crouched down and casually picking up one of the bags, Kanna opened her mouth as if she had realized something.

"This is… recent garbage. Originally, something was inside, and it was brought here and discarded."

"Did you use your ability just now?" Baron Koelt asked in astonishment.

"Yes. Reading this kind of information is my power."

"Remarkable. I would like to hear more if it weren't for the current situation… Anyway, there's no need to worry about these. They are presumed to be the trash that Baron Willhem left behind. What's important is over here."

With a scholar's curiosity, Baron Koelt quickly refocused and pointed to the full wall of patterns.

"Would you like to figure out what it is?"

"Symbols for tactical game cards," Kishiar answered quietly as soon as he entered, having been staring at the wall.

"Correct. These are symbols representing each card. In the very old days, the cards were not made in standardized forms as they are now. Any material marked with those symbols became that card. According to stories passed down in my family, the first Duke Tain enjoyed this very much."

Only then did the patterns on the wall become familiar to Yuder. Although adorned with many decorative elements, they were indeed in almost the same form as the symbols carved on the underside of the tactical game cards.

After scanning all of them, Yuder noticed something strange.

‘The game uses a total of 24 cards. The symbols drawn here are also 24, the same. But why are the numbers of types slightly different?’

Tactical games used 24 cards of 8 types. The most numerous common cards, ‘Yung,’ were 10, followed by five different cards with 2 to 3 each, and two cards controlling the game representing the ruler.

However, the symbols on the wall diverged slightly from these established rules. Some types were represented by four cards, while others had just one.

“Baron Willhem likely discovered this place but probably didn’t think much of these symbols, using it merely as a secret storage. Those who might have known about this place before also seemed not to have delved deeply into this particular aspect.”

However, Baron Koelt, who had a deep interest in history and had been conducting research, recognized it as an old military cipher at a glance.

“It’s a code used a long time ago. If you decipher it, it means, ‘Return the king in his entirety,’” he said.

“Here, there’s only one piece of the king’s card ‘Imum.’ But when only one piece of the priest’s card ‘Shen’ remains, it can temporarily become Imum.”

“That’s right. And here, there are only two of the priest’s cards drawn instead of the original three. So when one of them was covered like this…”

Baron Koelt agreed with Kishiar’s words and covered one of the symbols with his hand. At that moment, the symbols, filled with the blood from a wound on his hand, emitted light, and the inside, which had appeared empty like a storeroom, suddenly vibrated without a sound.

Yuder reflexively kept an eye on the surroundings, worrying that Kishiar or others might be in danger.

Moments later, facilities that had not existed just before appeared before their eyes.

Piles of paper that had been written on and drawn on countless times, a title-less book, a dried-up pen, and various other tools were revealed. Kanna let out a soft voice, saying,

“My goodness. It’s a real mage’s laboratory.”

“You wouldn’t believe how surprised I was when I saw it briefly earlier,” Ever murmured, just before Kishiar, who had stepped forward, picked up the closest book.

“Is this a diary? It’s written in a jumble of Gore script.” (a constructed language)

“Yes, it’s clear that a mage wrote this. The original owner might have been the first Duke of Tain, although I can’t confirm it as we haven’t read it all.”

Baron Koelt was aware that the first Duke of Tain had been a mage. Being fluent in Gore, he easily interpreted the text.

“Most of it is about research. I also discovered that studies on monsters were conducted here.”

“Monsters?”

“The majority of these piled papers contain drawings that describe observed monsters. It seems like captured monsters were likely kept and studied in this dungeon.”

“Interesting.”

Glancing at the heap of rolled-up papers, Kishiar nodded. The dungeon’s secret was finally being uncovered.

‘Studying monsters is still a controversial topic, so it makes sense that such research would be hidden during that time.’

Enon had mentioned that the Archmage Luma had been secretly researching ways to manipulate time. If the one who conducted research on monsters here was the first Duke of Tain, it seemed unlikely that there was any connection between the two.

It was slightly disappointing, as Yuder had hoped to learn more about Luma’s research.

‘For now, I’ll have to inform Enon…’

“What was the purpose of this research, according to the text?”

Kishiar, who had been flipping through the diary, then asked.

“If someone went to the lengths of keeping it a secret, they must have had a particular goal in mind.”

“Well, there was a section that could be speculated upon, but it seemed rather absurd to me, so…”

Baron Koelt didn’t continue, thinking that he might have misinterpreted the text. At that, Kishiar requested to see the specific page. The Baron handed the book to Kishiar, who opened it to the designated page.

“This is the section I’m referring to.”

Although the hastily written words mixed with Gore rendered the page unreadable for Yuder, Kishiar scanned through it with a calm and swift gaze.

”’*If we can discover the origins of these accursed beings, time that does not flow backward may also become an ally. Do you not harbor the same question and wish? When I asked this, my spiritual father gave no reply.*‘ Is this the section you mean?”

“Yes, that’s about as much as I could interpret as the objective of the research.”

Baron Koelt, unable to suppress his admiration, responded to Kishiar’s smooth reading of the Gore text.

“It certainly is somewhat absurd, as you say. What do you think, my assistant… Yuder?”

Turning his head as usual to inquire about his assistant’s opinion, Kishiar called out the name with a strange look in his eyes. Until that moment, no one had paid any attention to the dark-haired man standing behind Kishiar, but now all eyes were fixed on him.

“…Yes?”

Yuder finally snapped back to reality and responded. At a glance, his face seemed unchanged, but Kishiar alone discerned a slight tremor in his gaze.

“How does this discussion appear to you, assistant?”

“…I don’t know much about magic, so it’s difficult for me to comment.”

“I see, very well.”

Kishiar closed the journal he was holding.

“Kanna, what kind of information have you been able to gather here?”

“So far, I haven’t found anything noteworthy. This place was hidden by magic for so long, that’s probably why.”

Kanna shook her head, clearly disappointed.

“I see. Then, Baron Koelt, we will be busy going forward, but you’re the only one I can entrust with keeping an eye on this place. Would it be all right if I take this journal first for further examination? I find it personally intriguing.”

“Of course. I’d be honored. As a scholar, it’s something I’ve wanted to ask for myself. If I find any new information from the objects here, I’ll let you know.”

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Chapter 431

Leaving behind Baron Koelt, who appeared more lively than ever, Yuder followed Kishiar outside. Ever and Kanna were engrossed in a passionate conversation about the mysterious magic hidden within the mage's study, but hardly any of their words registered in Yuder's mind.

He responded in brief when directly questioned, preoccupied with contemplating the new information he'd gathered.

'I thought there was no connection between the research of the first Duke of Tain and that of Luma, but perhaps I was mistaken.'

The diary entries that Kishiar had deciphered were cryptic, difficult to immediately understand. However, terms like "the accursed beings" and "time" caught his attention distinctly.

'The "the accursed beings" must refer to the monsters he researched. If we can find out where these monsters came from, then time itself could become an ally… Is this not overly ominous?'

Both Baron Koelt and Kishiar found these ideas absurd, but Yuder couldn't bring himself to agree. He knew the kind of research Luma had conducted; he himself was someone who had genuinely traveled back in time.

If an Archmage like Luma had conducted research on something seemingly implausible, it meant he had reason to believe it was possible.

Had there been others before Yuder who had also traveled back in time?

Did Luma and the first Duke of Tain engage in their research concerning time because they had witnessed such an occurrence?

If their research had indeed made reversing time possible, what would Luma have intended to accomplish?

Yuder cast a fleeting glance at the worn book in Kishiar's hands.

He was immensely curious about its contents but could not think of a good excuse for someone of his ignorance to ask to see it.

'If only Enon were here, he could read it.'

As he pondered, Yuder met the gaze of Kishiar's red eyes, which had been watching him.

'…How long has he been watching me?'

Before Yuder could blink, Kishiar calmly initiated conversation.

"Are you interested in this diary? You've been staring at it."

Kishiar had looked at him the same way when Yuder had been too lost in thought to respond immediately after hearing the diary's contents.

Those eyes that seemed to penetrate the unknown, even when their owner had no concrete information, intrigued him.

Kishiar asked Yuder nothing, despite the many anomalies about him. Yet, that only made Kishiar all the more vigilant, unwilling to miss even the smallest fragment of information. It wasn't suspicion, per se. Underneath that scrutiny and patience was a complex web of enormous trust and fervent passion.

Even now, as he grappled with complicated feelings about Emperor Keilusa, Kishiar's focus remained steadfastly on Yuder.

Certain of this, Yuder quietly exhaled.

“No, I just found it fascinating for a moment.”

“Is that so? If your interest grows, feel free to speak up.”

This reply clearly signaled that Kishiar had noticed Yuder’s peculiar reaction to the diary.

It was easy to say he was interested, but what followed wouldn’t be as simple. Acting carelessly in front of a man so perceptive could unintentionally reveal secrets best left hidden.

‘Secrets…’

Yuder knew the kind of danger and agony his secrets held. People like Enon, who had always seemed mysterious even before Yuder knew he wasn’t human, would likely react differently if they discovered those secrets.

‘If the reaction I receive is as absurd as the contents of a diary from a long-dead first Duke Tain, I would consider myself fortunate.’

Being labeled a liar was not new to him. Neither was being accused of cheating, nor bearing the brunt of unadulterated hatred.

But what about Kishiar?

Until recently, Yuder had been able to do his own thing, resting assured in the quiet trust Kishiar seemed to offer. Maintaining secrets and handling the corresponding responsibilities hadn’t seemed all that difficult. Yuder had no doubt that whatever great endeavors Kishiar had in the future would render his own secrets irrelevant. In his past life, they were neither close friends nor bitter enemies, so Yuder felt no obligation to disclose anything.

But now, why did it feel so complicated?

‘No, I already know why.’

It was because he knew that Kishiar had already opened every door for Yuder.

It was because Kishiar had said he would willingly endure all the pain he felt for Yuder’s sake.

It was because, when Kishiar had embraced Yuder as he flew into the balcony, he smiled as if he had taken the whole world into his arms.

But knowing this also magnified the internal conflict that had been nurtured by indecision. It was a vague wavering Yuder had never felt before in his life. It was a sensation akin to the fear he felt the first time he realized he was powerless in the face of a monster.

Before boarding the carriage to return, Yuder looked around at the others and opened his mouth.

“Would it be possible for me to get off halfway?”

“Why?” Kishiar questioned.

“I remembered that there’s a small monster I want to check on.”

Though one of the main purposes was to meet Enon, it was also true that he had intended to see the creature called Pethuamet for tomorrow’s plans. Kanna gave him a puzzled look at the sudden request, but Yuder couldn’t explain.

Kishiar, who had been gazing at Yuder with a thoughtful expression, soon nodded to grant permission.

“Alright, go ahead.”

After boarding the carriage, Kishiar briefly told Kanna about where Pethuamet was located and who had been observing the

monster. Kanna was impressed by the medicine extracted from researching Pethuamet, which had played a crucial role in Yuder's recovery.

"So that's how it is. The letter I received was rather vague, so I wasn't sure what had happened. So, will the two of you be returning once this is over?"

"I can't say for certain. I've actually been considering postponing dealing with that monster due to this whole situation."

"Is that so?"

This was news to Yuder as well. He had assumed that they would take care of Pethuamet before leaving, once everything was settled.

"Hellem said finding a subject as useful for study as this is almost a miracle. It's unwise to leave any uncertainty that might cause issues in the future."

The way Kishiar looked at Yuder as he said 'issues' made it abundantly clear who he considered the subject to be.

It seemed Kishiar had started to think that even if Yuder was fully healed now, unforeseeable issues could arise at any moment. Having no counter-argument, Yuder remained silent.

"In that case, Commander, may I accompany Yuder as well?"

Kanna jumped in, her voice upbeat.

"I've almost finished all the work I had before coming here. I'd like to examine that monster after such a long time."

"Very well."

Kishiar readily agreed again. In the end, Yuder had to get off near the house where Mick and Hellem stayed, accompanied by Kanna.

“Ah, this is the place? It looks like such an ordinary house. No one would ever think that monster research happens here.”

Leaving Kanna behind, who shared a similar sentiment to Yuder at some point, a knock on the door was promptly followed by it creaking open. Upon seeing Yuder, Mick Shuden immediately let his guard down, breaking into a wide smile and spreading his arms.

“Ah! The assistant! I heard you’ve recovered, but it’s great to finally see you. What brings you here at this hour?”

“I apologize if I’ve interrupted your rest. I’ve come unexpectedly, but I’d like to see the monster for a moment.”

“Rest? I was actually drinking with my grandmother and the pharmacist. Please come in. Who’s the person behind you?”

“Her name is Kanna Wand. She’s the Jung Division Deputy Commander of the Cavalry.”

“Ah. I’m Mick Shuden. Nice to meet you.”

Exchanging a light handshake with Kanna, Mick scanned her face briefly while smiling.

“Indeed… Someone at the rank of Deputy Commander does stand out.”

“Is that so? Thank you for the compliment.”

“It’s not a compliment; it’s the truth.”

“You seem quite exceptional yourself, Mr. Mick.”

Both Mick and Kanna seemed to feel something from each other the moment their hands met, but as their intentions didn’t appear to be ill, Yuder silently moved past them and entered.

Just as Mick had mentioned, bottles of alcohol were littered across the table, where Enon had been sharing drinks with Hellem. On seeing Yuder, Enon's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"What now? Is something else wrong?"

"I've only come to see the monster."

Though it was difficult to mention any other objectives, Enon's eyes grew even more skeptical. Seeing this, Hellem greeted Yuder with a chuckle, holding her drink.

"It's been a while. You look healthy, and that's a relief."

"I apologize for the delay in expressing my gratitude."

"Oh, don't mention it. The real credit goes to our pharmacist here. Mick and I didn't provide much help."

At that moment, Kanna and Mick entered, momentarily halting their conversation.

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Chapter 432

“Hello. You’re the mage Hellem, right?”

“Yes, I am. And you are…?”

Yuder was about to introduce Kanna, but Mick spoke first, beating him to it.

“Grandmother, this is Ms. Kanna Wand. She’s one of the Deputy Commanders of the Cavalry. You know she immediately referred to me as Mr. Mick right after shaking hands? Hahaha. Such impressive skills.”

“What?”

“I’ll bring more cups now that we have more people! And more booze!”

After completing his statement, Mick vanished, leaving Kanna to awkwardly open her mouth.

“Nice to meet you. As you just heard, my name is Kanna Wand.”

She added that although she had the ability to read information through touch, her skill wasn’t particularly extraordinary. It seemed she was a bit concerned that Hellem might be cautious around her from the outset.

However, Hellem chuckled warmly and shook her head.

“If recognizing that I don’t like being called by my first name through just one touch isn’t impressive, then what is? You’re welcome here as someone serving my lord, so please feel comfortable.”

“Thank you!”

Kanna promptly took a seat next to Yuder and exchanged a glance with Enon. The atmosphere seemed to naturally turn towards a drinking session, prompting Yuder to quickly speak.

“Where is the monster kept?”

“It’s still over there. Shall we go see it right now?”

“Yes.”

“Ah-ah, that won’t do, Assistant! You promised me last time, remember? You have to try our famous imported liquor collection before leaving.”

But before Yuder could stand, Mick rushed back in, arms laden with several bottles and new cups, effectively stalling Yuder’s attempt.

“This is the ‘Tears of a Star,’ a 27-year-old liquor imported from the South! And this one is the ‘Breath of Glacier,’ a 50-year-old brew from Exita, the northern island where it’s winter all year! When would you have another opportunity to try these rare drinks?”

“Wow, I’ve never heard of any of these.”

“Exactly! Even the Emperor would find it difficult to sample these.”

“You sure have a way with words.”

Kanna responded, amused, as Mick proudly shook the bottles. Hellem chuckled as she drank, and nowhere was Yuder’s reluctance to join in evident.

“…”

“Just give in. He won’t let you go until you’ve had a few glasses.”

Enon, whose eyes met Yuder’s, muttered with a resigned expression. He seemed quite accustomed to such situations, clearly having been a participant in Mick’s drinking parties more than once or twice.

“To good times!”

In the end, Yuder was roped into joining them for drinks. While he never expected to be drinking with such company, thanks to Mick’s engaging conversation skills honed through years of trade, the atmosphere was surprisingly lively.

Initially, Mick dominated the conversation with unbelievable stories from his trading days in the northern territories. But as time wore on and Kanna started to get flushed from the alcohol, the Cavalry and Kishiar became the central topics.

Mick seemed to know quite a bit about the Cavalry but admitted he didn’t know much about its individual members, voicing his intense curiosity. Hellem wasn’t as talkative or outgoing as Mick, but she smiled easily and was more insightful than she appeared.

Yuder occasionally supplemented Kanna’s stories about the Cavalry when additional explanations were needed. At first, he had no intention of joining the conversation, but it was hard to ignore Hellem and Mick’s remarks about Kishiar in Peletta.

Hellem vividly remembered the moment when Kishiar became the new owner and Duke of Peletta, and how he had taken her to that barren land.

“Accompanied by a few knights for escort, just one attendant, Nathan, and myself, we arrived at a castle that looked as though it could crumble at any moment. It appeared as though it hadn’t been cleaned in hundreds of years. There weren’t even any servants, let

alone chamberlains. I was so furious that I wanted to turn around and confront the situation right away, but the lord casually slept through it all, without even batting an eye. Even the malicious steward held his tongue in the face of such calmness.”

“Wow. So even then, Sir Zuckerman had attended him.”

Kanna, who had gradually become comfortable speaking with Hellem, looked amazed.

“Yes, I had never seen a child so diligent and adorable.”

“Adorable, you say.”

Recalling Nathan Zuckerman, who had long since become gruff and imposing, Kanna bit her lip and rolled her eyes. Hellem let out a chuckle, as though understanding why she reacted that way.

“Back then, the lord was just a young boy. He really was…”

Yuder thought of a teenage Kishiar that he didn’t know.

While Hellem and Mick’s stories were not detailed, Yuder could easily imagine Kishiar’s appearance: a young man with an intimidatingly beautiful face who enchanted people while pretending to know nothing and often accomplished unbelievable feats.

Before he realized it, a significant amount of time had passed.

In that time, he had struck up a conversation with Mick, and Hellem had given him permission to address her more informally. Every time he remembered that this gentle elderly woman used to be the Chief of the Imperial Mage, Yuder felt a strange sense of discomfort.

Kanna was also engaging in a very lively conversation with the two, as if they had known each other for a long time.

“Grandmother Hellem, if Peletta is so cold, how about moving to the Cavalry? The Commander would probably like that… Ah, I almost forgot to mention, we currently have another mage staying in our unit.”

“Really? Who is it?”

“It’s Thais Yulman, from the Pearl Tower.”

“Thais? He’s with the Cavalry?”

While drinking what seemed to be her umpteenth glass of wine, Hellem paused and set down her glass. Her wrinkled eyes narrowed slightly behind her glasses.

“Do you know him?”

“Of course. Even when I was young and at the Pearl Tower, he was famous. He often committed outrageous acts in the name of research. I hope he has mellowed out by now… What’s the situation?”

“Heh…”

As Kanna hesitated to answer with a slight smile, Hellem sighed.

“People never change that easily. If he’s by the lord’s side, that’s definitely a concern. Perhaps I should go and check.”

“Grandmother, are you really thinking of going to the capital? Even when your grandson wrote to you, asking you to come, you never went.”

Mick, who was pouring a new drink, looked surprised.

“Oh? You have a specific reason for not going to the capital? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, no, it’s not that, Kanna. I simply didn’t return to the capital because there wasn’t much for me to do there. I have no desire to be a burden to my family by staying home all the time as I get older.”

The lord just happened to offer her a role that involves many responsibilities. Hellem sipped her wine and looked down. Yuder felt that her answer wasn’t entirely truthful.

“But, looking at the situation now… it seems the lord will not be staying in Peletta as much as before.”

Upon saying this, Hellem turned her eyes toward Yuder and smiled warmly.

“Even by my standards, yes.”

Mick’s face had also turned red up to his neck. Nodding emphatically, he moved so much that he banged his head against the wall with a thud. Thanks to that, Yuder was able to divert attention away from himself.

‘So, does that mean Hellem doesn’t intend to return to Peletta after this affair is over?’

Having an expert in monsters like her would undoubtedly be helpful in the future. Lost in thought for a moment, Yuder was suddenly jolted back to reality by a subtle poke to his side under the table. Turning his gaze, he saw Enon moving his lips ever so faintly.

“Everyone seems to have had enough to drink. If we’re going to see the monster, we should get up now.”

“…”

Ignoring those around him, Yuder slowly rose from his seat, leaving the other three engrossed in their own conversation.

As Yuder and Enon vacated their seats one after the other, the lively conversation behind them continued unabated.

“So, did you really come just to see the monster?”

“No.”

“I thought as much.”

Yuder stood in front of the cage positioned at the center of the dimly lit reception room, illuminated only by a single lantern. A small monster quickly approached and clung to the bars, looking towards him. It seemed like it had just been munching on a carrot, as an orange chunk dropped clumsily near its head.

Yuder watched the scene, pondering what to say first. Before coming here, he thought he’d have no problem talking upon meeting, but when he actually faced it, the words didn’t come easily.

“What is it? Is it that difficult?”

“I was just in the underground dungeon.”

“The underground dungeon?”

“The fourth floor.”

Enon nodded slowly, already aware of the fact that Yuder had found the hidden fourth floor under the protection of magic and rescued the victims of human trafficking there.

“And?”

“There, I discovered the laboratory of a person known as the first Duke Tain.”

“A laboratory, huh. So, was there something surprising?”

Yuder conveyed what he had found in the lab as ambiguously and succinctly as possible. Sketches of monsters that appeared to be researched by the first Duke Tain. An old diary intermingled with Gore scripts. And a significant sentence that Kishiar had deciphered.

“If what was written there really indicates the purpose of the research, then it might be related to what you mentioned before,” Yuder said.

For a moment, the look in Enon’s eyes changed slightly.

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Chapter 433

“True… We can only be sure once we read that diary, but the odds are high enough.”

“The diary is with the Commander. I think he would let us see it if we express interest… Would you be able to read it if I bring it?”

“I can read it. But first, I’d like to know why you’re looking so uneasy when you say that.”

Enon raised his eyebrows sharply and folded his arms.

“I’m pretty sure that’s the reason you came to me today, isn’t it?”

“…”

Enon’s ability to discern truth from lies was, as always, impressive.

Yuder silently looked down at Pethuamet, who was hanging from the iron bars and swinging its tail. It was incredibly difficult to articulate his complicated situation and emotions.

“Enon, you know where I come from.”

Although he’d ambiguously stated that he came from ‘the future,’ Enon would surely understand.

“But others don’t.”

Considering the importance of the information he held, it was wise to keep the circle of people who knew Yuder’s secret to a minimum.

But that was when he could judge everything based on utility alone—when he could trust no one fully and only move forward with his own safety and the prevention of impending disasters in mind.

“Until now, I had no intention of revealing that.”

He hadn’t gone to great lengths to hide it either. For what Yuder wanted to accomplish, he had to move in a way that raised some suspicion. So he had been blatantly suspicious in front of people like Nathan Zuckerman to achieve his goals, and had initially revealed his identity to Enon out of necessity.

“But if I borrow that diary this time…”

“Then the Commander will likely get a better sense of what you’re interested in, increasing the chances that your secret will be discovered. Is that your concern?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you might have shared some of your secrets with him as well, considering how close you seem to be. Quite unexpected.”

Enon moved closer to the iron bars and flicked the head of Pethuamet, who was swinging its tail in an attempt to get closer to Yuder. As the small monster toppled over, a bit of venom dripped from the tip of its tail.

“So even though he might have been suspicious of you, he just left you be? You’re definitely no ordinary human.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you mean by ‘yeah’? Think this is a compliment? I mean that you’re not normally insane, both you and him!”

Exasperated, Enon took a long breath. His hand hovered near his face as if he wanted to pinch his cheeks but eventually dropped down.

“Let’s clear one thing up. Is it the mere fact that your secret might be exposed that bothers you, or is there something else involving the Commander?”

Suppressing the tightening sensation in his chest, Yuder answered with minimal emotion.

“If I have to say, it’s the latter.”

Enon’s amber eyes darkened slightly.

Yuder looked at him, opening his mouth as if he wanted to ask something more, then chose his words carefully.

“While you may have guessed to some extent, I didn’t come back here just because I saw good things. A lot has changed from then to now. The environment, the people, everything.”

Yudrain Aile had witnessed countless deaths and calamities, and had even been directly involved in some of them. At the end, he himself concluded his life bearing the name of a sinner. Even after his return, and after changing many things, those facts had not completely disappeared within him.

“And the one who’s changed the most is the Commander.”

“Right. Now I can see why you were so concerned about him without needing to hear any more.”

“But so what?” Enon spat out roughly.

“If you’re already suspicious but still getting along with him, what’s the problem? From what I see, just go on and do your thing

as you usually do. If you're really worried, just tell him as much as you've told me. You can just give him the broad strokes, leaving out the details."

"It's not that easy to…"

"So it was easy for you to barge into my peaceful life and demand my help, but this is hard? Where's that insane confidence you had? You're amusing. I'm the fool for worrying because you looked unhappy!"

Worry? Before Yuder could respond to that, Enon sharply pinched his cheek.

"Just proceed as usual! I gave you the medicine that ignited your libido; just use my name and ask for more!"

"Enon."

He wanted to tell him that he was being too loud, but his cheeks were being stretched, making it hard to speak. Seizing the opportunity, Enon pinched and shook his other cheek.

"No. I'll go see the Commander tomorrow. I've been wondering whether I'd be more useful to him these days anyway."

"Are you, really, serious?"

Even while his head was shaking, Yuder couldn't ignore those words.

"Yes!"

After giving Yuder's cheek a final firm slap, Enon sighed and rubbed his forehead. A torrent of harsh words spilled from his mouth.

"Seriously, I've never met anyone like you. It's astonishing. Why can't you just live like ordinary people, doing what you want? And I,

too… Damn it!”

“Sorry.”

Yuder apologized reflexively. Enon pinched his cheek again, saying not to apologize. Yuder had thought Enon hadn’t taken offense until now, but seeing the fiery glint in his yellow eyes, he wondered if he’d been mistaken.

“That’s it. From now on, call me ‘big brother.’ You’re not giving anything but just causing stress, so I should at least get that level of respect.”

“…”

“What, you don’t like it? Fine. I don’t want to be called ‘grandfather’ or ‘uncle,’ so just stick with ‘big brother.’”

Enon sharply inquired as Yuder remained silent, his mouth slightly open. But the reason Yuder couldn’t answer was that Enon’s words had evoked memories of his past life.

Their relationship had begun in his previous life when Enon found Yuder severely injured and collapsed in a back alley. Dodging the pursuers who had followed him, Enon naturally brought Yuder to his apothecary and hid him, pretending he was his younger brother. After that incident, Enon naturally began calling himself “big brother.”

Of course, Yuder had not played along with this act, but their mysterious connection had continued, and Yuder had often been compelled to refer to him as “big brother” as a result.

‘“Is it that hard to let me heal you? Huh? Are you some kind of animal? Why do you always get so defensive? Do you even know how expensive this medicine is? There’s more to life than just getting injured. Why don’t you just carry some weight in my apothecary?”’

Initially, Yuder did not trust Enon. He thought Enon's appearance and circumstances were suspicious.

However, as their relationship continued over the years, Yuder had no choice but to believe at least that Enon had a disposition that wouldn't turn away those in need.

Enon's apothecary was always open to the poor in the capital. Despite his harsh manner, he gave medicine to everyone without demanding much payment. Many genuinely liked him. For those who couldn't even afford to go to a temple or a doctor, that place was the only sanctuary they could comfortably seek.

Enon never charged Yuder for the treatment either. Once, when Yuder tried to leave a significant amount of money, Enon firmly told him to just treat him like an older brother instead. His nature had not changed, even in the last letter he left behind.

And now, after such a long time, he said the same thing to Yuder again.

"…"

"Young lad, where did you pick up the bad habit of trying to bear everything alone…"

Yuder stared blankly at Enon's grumbling face and then lowered his eyes.

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A strange feeling had washed over him. Despite being yelled at and scolded, it didn't feel bad; it felt as though he had returned to an almost forgotten childhood.

"Did you two have a fight or something? You guys are being so loud."

Perhaps having heard Enon's incessant complaints, the drinkers finally leaned in. Mick, flushed from alcohol, nonchalantly draped an arm over Enon and Yuder, linking arms with both.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing at all."

Upon Yuder's denial, Mick chuckled as if he didn't care, the scent of alcohol heavy on his breath. Kanna, arriving a bit late, also looked flushed as she scrutinized Yuder.

"Really, you didn't fight? I thought Yuder got scolded by the pharmacist."

Though she tried to make her eyes sharp, this was probably the most effortless facial expression Kanna had ever displayed. It seemed pretty clear that she had drunk more than her usual amount.

"Ah, Kanna. You wanted to see the monster, right? Here it is."

Before Yuder could answer, Mick lightly tapped the cage that contained the monster, immediately drawing everyone's attention. Yuder and Enon exchanged a silent signal that seemed to say their conversation should end here.

“We’re done with our research, so we were thinking of naming the creature. But we haven’t come up with any good ideas yet.”

“Can you just name a monster like that?”

“Of course. If you’re the first to discover a new monster, anyone can name it. Since the Cavalry, the Duke, and the Western Mage Union didn’t give it a name, it’s left to us, isn’t it?”

“I see. I didn’t know that.”

“It’s understandable. So many new monsters appear every year that it’s pointless to get caught up in names. Still, if you want to make it easier for everyone involved, it’s better if those who discover the monster name it themselves.”

Hellem interjected.

“Would you two mind helping us think of a name while you’re here?”

“Hmm…”

Kanna frowned as she looked down at the monster.

Naming it wouldn’t be a pleasant task, given that she remembered the havoc this monster had wreaked in the Great Sarain Forest.

“For reference, I suggested the name ‘Penpen,’ which Grandma thought was too tame.”

“Penpen?”

“It’s what they call a doll made of bundled straw in the northern regions. Don’t you think it looks a bit like it?”

It didn’t look like it at all. Kanna seemed to share Yuder’s opinion, avoiding eye contact.

“That’s nonsense. You can’t give a monster such a cutesy name.”

“There’s no legal rule against it. Anyway, no one’s going to call it by that name and it’ll be forgotten soon, so why not just go with something arbitrary?”

Mick argued vigorously against Hellem’s rebuke. Yuder felt a sense of unfamiliarity in one part of what he had said.

‘It will be forgotten soon… is that so? This time it will be.’

In his previous life, Pethuamet had inflicted enormous damage upon the empire, so they had named it after a demon in the legends to serve as a long-standing point of reference.

He could have suggested naming this monster ‘Pethuamet’ again, but Yuder decided against it. This time, it felt far better to go with an insignificant name, just like Mick had suggested.

“What do you think, Yuder?”

“I think Mr. Mick’s opinion is reasonable.”

“…Really?”

Kanna wore an expression that seemed to doubt Yuder’s taste.

“See? The assistant knows what’s up.”

Mick laughed heartily, looking satisfied. Hellem sighed and suggested they think about it a little more.

Yuder found himself gazing at a small monster, its tail tinged with a shade of purple. He felt threatened as people crowded around

them. Suddenly, he remembered once again the research objectives of the first Duke Tain.

‘To find out where the monsters come from…’

Sacred texts imbued with the words of God explain the existence of monsters as a curse from the Black Moon. Though the power of the Black Moon had been overpowered and hidden from the world by those who demonstrated the strength of the Sun God, the cursed blood was said to still remain. When given an opportunity, it would seep into the world, manifesting as monsters.

Whether one was devout or not, the origin of monsters was generally accepted. Ask anyone other than Yuder, and they would give no more explanation.

But what if the first Duke Tain thought otherwise?

‘It’s as if questioning whether God really exists,’ Yuder mused.

Though his thoughts might differ if he spoke with Enon, it seemed best to reserve that conversation for another time.

While Yuder was lost in thought, the topic of conversation among the group changed once again. Hellem took a sip from her glass of liquor as she listened to Kanna talk about the poor relations between the Cavalry and the Imperial Knights. In particular, Kiolle from the House of Diarca had even challenged Yuder to a duel.

“The youngest of the House of Diarca? He’s grown that old already?”

“Wow, Grandma Hellem, do you also know that knight?”

“Know him? Let’s just say he left an impression because he was so audacious.”

“Why?”

Yuder had been disinterested until Kiolle’s name came up, but now it was a different story.

“When Kiolle was born, the Duke of Diarca directly asked the Empress to name his son. And the name the Empress bestowed used far too many letters that were intentionally similar to those of the Second Prince Kishiar at the time, which created a big uproar.”

Yuder hadn’t expected the conversation to suddenly involve Kishiar. As Yuder turned his head, Kanna cautiously asked, “Was that such a big deal?”

“A big deal indeed. No noble would dare to name their child so closely to that of a prince or princess destined to lead the nation. Historically unprecedented, it cast doubt on their intentions… it was a move that made many uncomfortable.”

Hellem seemed to hold some certainty about this, despite cutting her sentence short.

“The characters in the Emperor’s and lord Kishiar’s, contain sounds that were chosen intentionally by the previous Emperor to emulate a hero he admired, adhering to the royal naming conventions. However, the Duke of Diarca, knowing this, subtly crossed the line right from the time he named his first child.”

Finally, by the time he named Kiolle, the similarity between Kishiar and Kiolle’s names became a topic of gossip and exploded in the public eye.

It might sound like a small, old dispute over the names of children, but there seemed to be a deeper story beneath it. However, Hellem didn’t elaborate any further. She simply stared at the little liquor left in her glass and let out a deep sigh.

“Enough of these uninteresting old tales. Drinking makes it all the less enjoyable.”

She drained her remaining drink and suggested it was time to truly rest. Mick, who had drunk the most yet still wanted more, was disappointed, but Yuder had no complaints.

“I apologize for coming so late. I should be on my way now.”

“You’re welcome anytime. But before you go, Yuder, would you call me Grandma just once?”

Although he agreed, Yuder found it a little difficult.

“I apologize. Please consider me as being respectful to the degree of calling you ‘Madam Hellem.’”

“I’ve thought this since I first met you; you’re quite stubborn. Now I see why my Lord wanted to keep you by his side.”

“…”

Yuder was silent, not knowing how to respond, and Hellem quietly smiled.

“However, I think it would be better if Kanna stays here for the night.”

Yuder turned his head and found Kanna, who had become extremely drowsy in her seat. Seeing her nodding off, it was clear that walking back together was out of the question.

“That seems best.”

“She can sleep in my room; I’ll send her home tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

As Hellem took care of Kanna, Mick and Enon bid Yuder farewell.

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“Hmm, I wanted to see you drunk, but it’s unfortunate. You’re not even tipsy, are you?”

Mick spoke with a slightly twisted tongue, vowing to prepare stronger alcohol next time. It was a futile effort; it wouldn’t have mattered.

Enon, who was supporting the swaying figure beside him, spoke with a furrowed brow and a tired expression.

“Go to bed, you drunkard. And as for you… it’s late. Can’t you just rest here for the night? Is there a reason you must leave right now?”

He had said he would check on the monster briefly, but there was no pressing need to leave immediately. Staying for the night like Kanna had done wouldn’t pose any problems.

Yet Yuder, after a moment of silence, shook his head.

He didn’t want to, knowing Kishiar was alone back at the lodging.

“…Thanks for the offer, but I’ll be going.”

Enon seemed to have expected this, somehow. He sighed deeply and licked his lips as if to say he understood. He closed his mouth, swallowing whatever he had been about to say, and let go of the supporting Mick.

“Fine, then. See you tomorrow.”

“Sure.”

“Ah! Speaking of which.”

Just as Yuder was turning to leave, Mick, who had been leaning on Enon, suddenly perked up and shouted. Had anyone with a weak heart been present, they would have been startled to the point of collapse. Neither Yuder nor Enon reacted, merely observing Mick’s antics.

“Sir, you seem to have fewer holes than before. I’ve been counting, and it seems right. Or is it not? Eh? It seemed so earlier, but now I’m not so sure.”

“…”

“Heh, heh, just saying. I don’t know if it’s because you’re healing, but it’s fortunate, anyway… Next time, my Lord should join us for drinks. He can hold his liquor quite well, too…”

Mick’s ramblings were cut short as he slumped over again, snoring loudly. Enon muttered disdainfully.

“This guy, when he gets drunk, he keeps getting up and shouting, making a ruckus.”

“You’ve seen it a lot, I take it.”

“He’s practically an alcoholic. He always finds an excuse to drink at least a bottle a day. At least he doesn’t throw up or crawl on the ground. Still, to think he’s the owner of this establishment. I’m starting to doubt its legitimacy.”

It seemed like he had witnessed this behavior more than once during their joint research. Had Yuder found it disruptive, he would have sought immediate solutions. But Enon, despite his complaints, made sure Mick didn’t bang his head against the wall, showing his caring nature.

It was this side of him that made others gradually lean on Enon more. Lusan had done so, and now Mick, and even Yuder, whether he cared to admit it or not.

As Yuder stared at this scene, Enon abruptly asked,

“Are you not leaving?”

He had to go. But Yuder hesitated for a moment, his step faltering as Mick snored audibly, blending with the sounds of nocturnal insects.

After a long, silent pause, Yuder whispered in a voice so soft it was almost drowned out by the ambient noise.

“…Enon.”

“What now? Don’t you remember me saying to treat me like an older brother earlier? Although someone who refused to call ‘grandma’ is unlikely to agree to that…”

“Big brother.”

Enon, who had been continuing his biting comments, suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“You… what did you just say?”

“Thanks for today. But you don’t have to come tomorrow.”

With that, Yuder leapt into the wind, soaring away.

Sounds from below suggested that something was going on, but Yuder paid them no mind. Inexplicable sensations simmered and churned within him, only to ebb away repeatedly.

He arrived swiftly at the towering mansion of the Willhem family, not far from his location. No one noticed Yuder’s presence as he

entered the dimly lit house, where most people were asleep, and silently ascended the staircase.

Yuder knocked very softly on the door of the quarters. When no answer came, he slowly turned the handle. The man he had expected to be asleep in bed was not there. Only then, as he turned his head toward the magic stone stove that was the only source of light in the room, did he see Kishiar, sitting in a chair with his eyes closed.

‘Is he… sleeping?’

Yuder cautiously approached him. The usual Kishiar would have opened his eyes by now, but there was no response.

This was a first, and Yuder found it somewhat disconcerting.

Just as Yuder was about to speak, his gaze fell upon the objects on the table beside Kishiar. An old diary brought from the underground dungeons of the security force, and two letters he had been reading before departing. All this was as he had expected, but his attention was freshly captured by a new, open letter.

After completing his task of sealing the letters, the torn wax seal looked all too familiar. It was the emblem used by the Emperor residing in the Sun Palace when sending secret correspondence.

So, a letter from Emperor Keilusa has already arrived while he was meeting Enon? The communication was faster than anticipated.

“…”

Unknowingly fixated on the letter, Yuder suddenly felt a stirring beside him.

“Commander…”

Thinking that Kishiar had risen, Yuder hastily turned, only to be met by Kishiar’s still-closed eyes and pale face.

Kishiar had not yet awakened, but he also did not seem to be having a peaceful dream. His shallow breaths were rougher than usual, and his long eyelashes fluttered uneasily beneath his furrowed brows.

Only after noting the sweat trickling down between Kishiar’s temples, in the flickering shadows of the flame, did Yuder grab his shoulder and shake him.

“Commander? Commander!”

A barely audible sound emanated faintly from Kishiar’s throat.

“Commander, wake up. Commander!”

Shaking the shoulder more vigorously than before, Yuder cautiously touched the man’s neck and face with a gloved hand.

“Cold.”

Startled by the icy chill of the skin, Yuder was about to retract his hand when suddenly, Kishiar’s fingers swiftly gripped his hand. Losing his balance, Yuder fell onto Kishiar’s body.

“…”

Just as Yuder was trying to rise quickly and adjust his posture, a faint voice floated above his head.

“No, Yudrain…”

A heavy mumble.

For a moment, everything seemed to come to a standstill.

He felt as if all the blood in his body had rushed to his feet, draining away and leaving him dizzy.

Forgetting even to breathe, Yuder felt the grip on his hand loosening after what seemed like an eternity.

As Yuder's hand fell limp against Kishiar's body, the man twitched.

Finally, Kishiar's eyelids fluttered and his red eyes came sharply into focus. For a moment, Kishiar seemed to struggle with his sense of reality, blinking quietly as he looked at Yuder's face, frozen and pallid before him. Kishiar's hand moved to touch Yuder's hair and cheek lightly. Then, a moment later, the familiar faint smile finally curled at the corners of his lips.

"…What is this? My assistant has a talent for waking me up in unexpected ways, it seems."

"…"

Despite his gentle jest, Yuder found it difficult to speak. His eyes, heavy with a dark undertow, scanned Kishiar's face relentlessly through the sharply indrawn breaths.

At this, Kishiar finally tilted his head, as if sensing something unusual.

"What's the matter? Was there some incident outside?"

"…You, Commander didn't wake up."

For a moment, Yuder's voice was astonishingly constricted.

"Ah, did I sleep so deeply that it surprised you? That happens occasionally."

"No, it's not that you simply didn't wake up…"

Yuder hesitated, unsure how to explain what he had just witnessed. He clenched his teeth. For the first time, he realized how difficult it was to keep his composure. With his fist clenched tightly, he finally forced the words out, drawing on the sharp pain sinking into his palm.

“I tried to wake you because it seemed like you were having a bad dream…”

“Hmm…”

“Do you remember, by any chance, what dream you had?”

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Yuder tried to ask cautiously, hiding his tension as best as he could, but he couldn't tell if he had succeeded. Kishiar's gaze seemed to blur for a moment. The man who appeared to be recollecting distant memories soon lightly shook his head.

"It wasn't a pleasant dream, that's for sure… but I can't remember anymore. Was my condition that alarming for my assistant to be so concerned?"

It wasn't merely a matter of looking unwell.

If he had heard correctly, Kishiar had called out a certain name.

A name that no longer existed, a name that had died and vanished.

Even if it was a slurred whisper spoken in a drowsy state, there was no way Yuder wouldn't recognize that name.

"In your sleep, you spoke to me… Don't you remember that?"

"Spoke?"

Kishiar closed and opened his eyes, slightly furrowing his brows.

"…Nothing comes to mind. May I ask what I said?"

'Does he truly not remember?'

Yuder scrutinized Kishiar's face for a long while, knowing there was no particular reason for him to lie. Kishiar, in return, seemed to be evaluating Yuder intently with fully awake eyes.

The emotions flickering in those eyes were just as calm and clear as ever, filled with curiosity and a deep, cautious concern directed at Yuder.

And so, Yuder finally became certain.

'…He truly doesn't remember.'

Kishiar had genuinely forgotten what he had just dreamt. Only after confirming this several times did Yuder feel the tension within his eyes relax. He pondered intensely for a brief moment whether to answer Kishiar's question, all while trying to suppress his own surprise and shock.

Even if he doesn't remember now, might mentioning it trigger something?

What would happen next?

A shapeless, dark shadow seemed to writhe in his gut. He wanted to escape all of this immediately, yet the moment he met Kishiar's deep, cautious gaze, he had no choice but to accept a certain truth.

Even in a moment where profound confusion clawed at his heart, the flame of desire within Yuder hadn't diminished in the slightest.

If Kishiar wanted to know, then he had to tell him.

Feeling his heart race uncontrollably, Yuder slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"'No, Yudrain…' That's what you said."

Kishiar's brows furrowed a few times before returning to normal.

"Even hearing it… I still don't remember."

His eyes were, once again, speaking the truth.

Feeling his heartbeat slow down, Yuder took a deep breath.

He lowered his eyes and inhaled slowly, counting to one before exhaling, repeating the cycle a few times. Gradually, warmth returned to his cold hands.

It was a short period, almost imperceptible, but enough for him to regain his composure. Ironically, it was the simplest calming technique that Kishiar had taught him in a previous life. He had forgotten about it until now, not having had the need for it, but in this moment, it naturally came to mind.

Only then did Yuder realize he was still seated next to Kishiar. He leaned on the armrest of his chair to get up, and Kishiar's gaze followed his every move.

"You seem far worse than I do. Are you sure nothing happened outside? What about Kanna?"

"Nothing happened."

His voice sounded far more stable than before. Yuder found relief in this fact and added further explanation.

"Kanna is staying there tonight, thanks to Hellem's hospitality. She'll be back tomorrow."

"Judging by the smell of alcohol, I suppose you've been drinking."

"…Yes."

Kishiar replied as if it was plainly obvious, though he wasn't intoxicated, and his clothes weren't damp from any drink. His sense of smell must have been keen.

Yuder briefly explained what he had done there. Kishiar's expression remained unchanged, just as it had been a few hours ago when Yuder last saw him.

A familiar sight. A familiar face.

And superimposed upon it, another man with the same face, his eyes carrying the weariness and pallor of illness.

The moment Yuder thought of him, all efforts to calm himself seemed worthless. Once again, he recalled the voice that used to murmur a name now buried and forgotten.

'No, Yudrain…'

Even if one doesn't remember, it's not an ordinary thing. How could Kishiar even mention a name he should know nothing about?

The eerie possibility that he, too, saw his past life through dreams seemed somewhat plausible, though he didn't remember upon waking.

Then why Kishiar of all people?

He wasn't someone who had turned back time like Yuder. Yet, if he was seeing his past life through dreams, there must be a reason. Amid his fervent search for that reason, a word suddenly popped into Yuder's mind.

'Connection.'

Kishiar once mentioned that he felt and saw a thin thread-like strange connection when he tried to find Yuder battling the massive Pethuamet. Following that thread led him to Yuder—a scarcely believable experience that had also appeared to Yuder not long ago.

A single glowing link that appeared for a moment when Yuder was desperately searching for Kishiar in the darkness.

Though he had never seen it in his past life, he felt ‘connected’ to Kishiar at that moment. This started after the accident that happened on the day of his second gender manifestation.

Many memories related to that day had been forgotten until they slowly started to resurface. At that time, Yuder had felt so intermingled with Kishiar’s emotions that it was difficult to distinguish between the two. It was a horrifying sensation in some respects.

However, after Kishiar died, Yuder never felt that sensation again. According to the last dream he had, it seemed like Kishiar had somehow discerned the nature of that ‘connection’ and hinted at a possible solution.

The connection severed after his death. And then something again connected them in this life, thread-like.

Though he believed the two to be different, they were alike in that both connected Yuder and Kishiar.

‘Could this inexplicable thread be influencing Kishiar?’

If emotions could mix, why not memories? The idea that Kishiar might be influenced by Yuder’s memories seemed a better explanation than the notion that only Kishiar dreamt of a past life.

‘But nothing happened during the second gender manifestation this time, so where did this connection even start?’

Wasn’t the connection from the previous life already severed long ago?

Could it be restored by coming back to a time when Kishiar was alive? Was that even possible?

Why did this thread exist between them in the first place?

Despite knowing that pondering wouldn't provide a logical answer, Yuder couldn't stop his thoughts. And Kishiar, too, noticed once more that Yuder's gaze was directed at him.

"…Yuder."

Yuder snapped to attention.

"I'm sure you're tired, coming all the way here and delivering your report so late at night. I apologize for causing you additional worry."

"No, it's fine."

Kishiar seemed to assume that Yuder's reaction was mostly due to an excessive concern directed at him.

"Tomorrow is going to be even busier than today, so you should get some rest soon. I received a message from His Majesty during your absence. Judging by the timing, it seems he sent it right after waking up."

Upon hearing that, Yuder's gaze reflexively shifted to the table. Until he heard the shocking name from Kishiar's lips, his nerves had been on edge with all sorts of speculations about Kishiar's strange dream and its connection to the Emperor's letter. But now, he felt somewhat relieved.

"Did His Majesty issue an order for a quick return?"

"No."

Kishiar looked down at the letter, his expression displaying a deeper smile than usual.

"The message is succinct. First, it informs us that the investigators dispatched to look into Baron Willhem and the illegal

auction will arrive here soon. Secondly, it orders that the Cavalry members active in the west must return to the capital on the same day.”

It sounded like a formal message that belied any notion that it was sent by someone who had just collapsed. However, Yuder soon realized that wasn’t all there was to it.

“The Cavalry members must return to the capital on the same day, meaning…”

“In other words, regardless of any previous messages we’ve received, we’re supposed to finish all our duties here and return at our leisure. Just make sure nothing changes the schedule,” Kishiar concluded, confirming Yuder’s own thoughts.

The letter was cold and impersonal, urging a sibling to focus only on work, even while knowing that death was drawing near. Though one might interpret it as a letter implying “I’ve woken up safely, so don’t worry,” the undercurrent of bitterness was undeniable.

It was clear that Emperor Keilusa had anticipated his brother’s inclination to rush back and sent such a letter preemptively.

Cold pragmatism, which sometimes brought comfort to others, did not always do so. At least, when looking at the subtle but noticeably cooler expression on Kishiar’s face since waking up, it was clear the letter had not only brought relief.

Yuder broke the silence. “Commander, will you follow His Majesty’s orders?”

“I’ve received them, so I’ll have to obey. However, complying with all procedures will take time, so we’ll need to find a way to speed that up.”

Kishiar didn’t seem content to just obediently follow the orders. His statement that tomorrow would be busier than today appeared to have been made with that in mind.

Kishiar folded up the letter that had been lying open on the table and put it back into its envelope. As he tossed the letter into the magic stove to burn it, Yuder pondered about Emperor Keilusa.

In his previous life, he had not known much about the last Emperor of the previous imperial line, but he seemed to be a more calculated and planned individual than Yuder had expected. To prioritize scheduled matters and firmly push away the concerns of those around him, even while feeling the approach of his own death, was no ordinary composure.

And that quality surprisingly reminded him of Kishiar from his past life.

Standing side by side, the Emperor and Kishiar had atmospheres that were complete opposites. However, as brothers who shared the same blood, it was natural for them to have many similarities. Raised in the same place, spending the same amount of time together, and working towards the same goals, it wasn’t surprising that their actions felt similar.

Could he then understand the Kishiar of his past life through what he felt from Keilusa?

‘…No matter what I do, I can’t seem to get my mind off of him.’

His thoughts circled endlessly around Kishiar, to the point where he couldn’t help but give a bitter chuckle at his own preoccupation.

In the meantime, having confirmed that the letter had turned to ash, Kishiar stood up and headed towards the bed. It seemed he assumed there would be no more conversation for the night and was preparing to sleep.

The night had deepened, edging closer to dawn. Given that it had been a long day full of activities, and news had even come that the Emperor had collapsed and then awakened, it probably wasn't wise to press further about the nightmare just yet.

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Because of this, Yuder decided to quell his confusion and take some time to investigate the phenomena related to Kishiar and his dreams.

The next day, just after dawn, the whole of the Orr Empire was turned upside down multiple times.

Firstly, the news of the illegal trade secretly orchestrated by Duke Tain and the arrest of the people involved in the secret auctions held in Tainu were publicly announced with the Emperor’s approval.

The news itself was shocking, but what took everyone by surprise was that it had been uncovered by the Cavalry, which had gone to the west for monster subjugation, and Duke Peletta.

Duke Peletta was known to be staying briefly in Tainu to wrap things up after the monster subjugation. Amidst this, the fact that he had captured those involved in illegally kidnapping Awakeners and buying dangerous items illegally had led straight back to Baron Willhem and Duke Tain. This revelation had many expressing their fears and sighs.

The Cavalry spared no nobles who had participated in the illegal auction and revealed each of their names. The fact that members of the Apeto family who had previously fled justice were among them hardly surprised anyone at this point.

With this development, rumors that Duke Peletta was the new owner of the Divine Sword no longer seemed like simple jokes. The Cavalry also began to attract much more attention than before they had left for the West.

However, despite all these astonishing achievements, people still knew very little about Duke Peletta and the Cavalry.

Some insisted that it was all an exaggeration, claiming that Duke Peletta wasn't capable enough to accomplish such feats. Others recoiled at rumors that he was an egregious philanderer who always had men by his side.

While many spun conspiracy theories about the true nature of the incidents in the distant West, one thing was clear: Duke Tain's family had not denied any of it.

Not even the Duke's cousin, the head of the imperial knights, Theorado, nor the influential elders of the Tain family who had retired to a life of obscurity, showed any signs of protest. Nobles who supported Duke Tain protested, claiming the allegations were preposterous, but the fact that the influential members of the Tain family did not defend him was highly suggestive.

Gossip lovers speculated that this revealed long-standing internal discord within Duke Tain's family. The theory that family members had momentarily allied with the Emperor to overthrow the current Duke gained considerable traction.

As if to confirm these rumors, no sooner had the news of the Duke facing trial been announced than the family quickly convened a meeting to announce the previously vacant successor. Priscilla van Tain, the second daughter who had been shrouded in secrecy, was granted the authority to manage family affairs. Her older brother, Pruelle van Tain, who had been considered the most likely next Duke, announced his full support for Priscilla's succession.

The current Duke's sole wife and mother to all his children, Duchess Clandie, also declared in a letter sent from her distant southern villa that she would abide by the decisions made in the family council, thus supporting her children.

Opinions across different strata of the Empire were quite divided on this news.

Duke Diarca and those who followed him had defended Duke Tain, asserting that putting a noble family that had led their dukedom for a thousand years on trial solely based on some voices within the family and the Emperor’s will, without clear evidence, was historically unprecedented.

Of course, his defense was not because he was fond of Duke Tain. Those who followed Duke Diarca were wary of Duke Tain’s trial that had come to light shortly after the Apeto affair, as well as any potential rise in the Emperor’s faction as a result.

The Crown Prince Katchian, who had been keeping silent for unclear reasons, did not express his opinion, but people naturally assumed that what Duke Diarca said reflected his own thoughts as well.

As for the Apeto dukedom, its firstborn son Aishes, who was not capable of managing his own family, and Duke Herne, who was recovering in his homeland, did not openly object like Duke Diarca but indirectly showed their intent to keep an eye on the situation.

Most nobles were uneasy at the upheaval in yet another ancient dukedom but also predicted that it was merely an internal shift in another family’s power and nothing significant would change.

In reality, many had disappeared after the tragedy of the Apeto family, and even the Duke of Apeto had fallen. But months had passed, and the majority believed that not much had actually changed. The fact that Aishes, who had become the acting Duke of Apeto, had not followed the Emperor as closely as expected had significantly contributed to this sense of relief.

Everyone knew that the Emperor didn’t have enough power to engage the nobles in open conflict. He was struggling to prevent

becoming a mere puppet, bolstering his power through the Cavalry and Duke Peletta, but what could someone who didn't even show his face actually achieve?

As many nobles oscillated between caution and dismissiveness, the Empire's court calendar was once again filled with a new series of large-scale trials after a period of quiet following the Apeto family tragedy. And again, all eyes were on this matter.

Ordinary people living outside the realm of politics were angry at the crimes committed by Duke Tain and grateful for the swift action by the Emperor and Duke Peletta. Some neighboring countries hurriedly distanced themselves, fearing revelations of illegal trade, while other foreign lands watched the unfolding events with great interest for their own gain and curiosity.

But the attention wasn't solely political.

A minister from one country emphasized the central role of the Cavalry in handling this affair and strongly advocated for creating a similar organization in his own nation. Latecomers to the study of the Awakeners also emerged.

Though the Empire's nobles barely paid attention, the Cavalry, the only organization that had successfully gathered the mysterious Awakeners, were taking steps that increasingly held a different meaning than before.

And Yuder Aile, considered one of the key figures in the Cavalry, burdened with the weighty task of attempting something crucial with Duke Peletta that night, stood behind Kishiar, listening to the conversations.

"Is that the final list of members, then?"

"Yes, everyone here will become part of the Western Branch."

Kishiar had gotten to work at an incredible speed, setting up the Western Branch immediately upon waking. No one had expected that he would finalize the list of members and explain the structure to them in just a few hours.

If Baron Koelt were to fully replace Baron Willhem, the operations of the Cavalry's local branch could commence immediately with just a single approval. Such was the efficiency and perfection of the arrangements.

The faces of those who would soon become members of the Cavalry unit's western branch were filled with tension as they looked at Kishiar. Yuder specifically noticed the expression on the face of Emun Philang, who was standing among them. All those joining the branch were volunteers, and surprisingly, Emun was the first to raise his hand, expressing his desire to become a part of the western branch.

The reason Emun, who typically avoided drawing attention to himself, stepped forward was simple. He wanted to continue assisting the memory-lost individuals and the Awakeners who were victims of human trafficking whom he had been caring for alongside Lusan. Even as he stuttered with a flushed face, his intent was clear. Recognizing this, Kishiar immediately appointed Emun as the acting head of the western branch.

"Very well, Emun. It's best for you to get accustomed to the work by participating in the conclusion of this current matter alongside the Deputy Commanders."

"Yes, yes, I will."

"The first task for the western branch will be to look after and protect the Star of Nagran left here, as well as the awakened individuals who are struggling in the west. It won't be easy to oversee so many people, but I trust you."

The matter of the Star of Nagran had not yet been officially announced. Kishiar planned to complete all investigations regarding them and, depending on the severity of their crimes, segregate them for management within the western branch.

Emun's face lit up with renewed determination at Kishiar's words.

"I understand. I will do my best."

"Good."

The next group Kishiar met were individuals sent by Emperor Keilusa to Tainu to investigate the secret auction more systematically. They respectfully knelt before Kishiar, who had come to greet them, and received an update on the work carried out by both the Cavalry and the Peletta Knights. From this point on, they would be responsible for investigation and punishment in the western region, taking over from the Cavalry after their departure.

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Chapter 438

Yuder silently observed from a distance as Kishiar engaged in conversations with the Emperor's officials, who openly admired the way he had been handling matters. Although their ranks seemed to be rather high based on the introductions, their faces were entirely unfamiliar to Yuder. It was because he had never met them in his previous life.

Naturally, this was to be expected. If these were people whom Emperor Keilusa trusted enough to send this far, it was likely they hadn't retained their positions since the ascension of Emperor Katchian.

Kishiar appeared to be well-acquainted with them as he mingled friendly banter with discussions about future plans. Yuder, observing Kishiar's radiant and healthy face, was reminded of the events from last night.

Despite the numerous occurrences yesterday, the interactions between Kishiar and Yuder had progressed just like any other day. There were no disturbances in their meals or daily tasks.

However, Yuder felt an indescribable sense that something unknown and hidden lay within that handsome visage. Though Kishiar seemed to have forgotten all about his sleep-talking, Yuder found it difficult to cease his discreet yet persistent observations.

"…Ah, is that the rumored young man your assistant from the Cavalry unit?"

Just then, one of the officials sent by Emperor Keilusa inquired about Yuder, drawing his attention. Yuder snapped out of his reverie and turned his head.

“Yuder is indeed my assistant, but I’m not sure what you mean by ‘the rumored,’ Melina. Could you clarify?”

“Do you really want to hear it?”

Melina, the official addressed, responded to Kishiar’s curious question without hesitation.

“The rumors vary quite a lot. From tales of him indulging in drinking monster blood after slaying them, to being an Awakener with a second gender who possesses mysterious powers that can easily capture Your Highness, to even being strikingly beautiful at first glance. Particularly, the gossip about occupying a rest area at a party and eventually destroying the bed has been buzzing even beyond Tainu.”

Yuder had a rough idea of how rumors about him might circulate, but hearing them so directly and explicitly was a first.

The malicious rumor about drinking monster blood probably originated from those who had seen the stains left by Pethuamet’s blood. As for the rumors about breaking beds or being beautiful, those were intentional byproducts of the romantic schemes orchestrated by Kishiar, so they weren’t a concern.

But the rumor about him being a second-gender Awakener was baffling. How did that get mixed in? While Yuder remained silent, Kishiar burst into laughter.

“So, listening to all this, it seems none of you believe a word of it?”

“It’s our job not to believe things too easily. Aren’t they obviously false rumors?”

True to their words, the officials’ faces didn’t reveal any personal emotions despite speaking directly about the rumors.

“Good attitude,” Kishiar complimented them with a smile and then turned his head toward Yuder. Their eyes met, and it felt like peering into a calm, deep lake.

“But there’s a difference between being skeptical and outright dismissing something as false without attempting to discern the truth. You see, in this world, there’s almost no such thing as a perfect lie. Most lies carry shards of truth within them.”

The message was clearly intended for the officials. Yet, Yuder felt as if it was directed at him, especially the part about there being no perfect lies.

“…Is that so? I couldn’t even guess that the aspects I mentioned carry shards of truth. In that case, we will take note of the parts you claim to be factual, Your Highness.”

“Ah, Melina. Can’t you tell what’s a fragment of truth at first glance?”

Kishiar tilted his head, asking the question in a serious tone.

“Where can you find a more accurate fragment of truth than the fact that my assistant is incredibly beautiful?”

“…”

For a moment, everyone’s gaze simultaneously shifted to Yuder, only to return back to silence. Yuder, who had thought that he would speak about the second gender, also found his mind empty for the first time in a while. Fortunately, the official deftly changed the subject.

“Um… I see. Yes, understood. Your Highness, there are several important matters I’d like to discuss with you. Could we have the room?”

Given the look from the assistant, who obviously didn't want to speak about the real truth, Kishiar consented. Thanks to this, Yuder was able to step outside for a moment.

The place where they had been working all day was a space inside the mansion that, until a few days ago, had served as Baron Willhem's office. The Cavalry members guarding the exterior looked at Yuder with curiosity.

"Why did you come out alone? Where is the Commander?"

"He said they have important matters to discuss."

"I see. We're about to switch shifts; want to get some fresh air with us?"

Yuder quietly shook his head. The members seemed a bit disappointed, but Yuder barely had the energy left to even think about them. He walked over to a window and took a long breath.

Tainu had regained its peace at an astonishing speed since the day of the auction, and it was incredibly quiet today as well. Yet Yuder's mind was focused solely on those who were still in the office.

'I've spent so much time with him, and yet he's still so inscrutable.'

One moment he makes cryptic comments about lies and truth, and the next he suddenly changes the atmosphere with a joke. Was it a form of consideration, or was it an extreme attempt to hide his thoughts? It was hard to guess.

Did he mean not to take yesterday's events too seriously? Did he intend to overlook and move on from Yuder Aile's unusually different behavior this time as well?

‘…Considering the Emperor’s health, now is not the time to focus on other matters.’

If it had been before, he would have regained his composure the moment he made such an assumption. But he didn’t feel as good about it now.

He hadn’t wanted to realize that peace could make a person anxious in this way. For Yuder, it was an uncomfortably unfamiliar moment.

Unfamiliar emotions bubbled up like the surface of the sea on a stormy day.

“…Yuder!”

Just then, a familiar voice came from behind him. It was Kanna, wedged between the members who had come to switch shifts. With a face that still hadn’t shaken off the hangover, Kanna waved her hand and came over, patting Yuder on the back.

“What the heck, man? Leaving me there alone, do you know how surprised I was when I woke up and the sun was already high in the sky, and I was the only one lying in Grandma Hellem’s room?”

She said that, despite the heavy drinking yesterday, surprisingly everyone else had woken up before Kanna. After reading the teasing intent hidden in Mick’s casual suggestion to have breakfast, she had declined and returned late to Baron Willhem’s mansion. As he listened to this story, Yuder found himself thinking about Kishiar again.

If he had Kanna’s kind of power, could he have quickly understood the unbelievable sleep talk he had heard last night? Could one read information even the speaker himself couldn’t remember with such a power?

From the start, about this strange ‘connection’…

“What happened, exactly?”

The train of thought that had been chugging along suddenly came to a halt, interrupted by a heavy question. Kanna’s eyes, which had been fluttering nervously, were now shining with a completely different light as she looked at Yuder.

“…”

“For a moment, I sensed an overwhelmingly negative emotion from you… No, not sensed—I read it, even though I didn’t intend to…”

Yuder paused his contemplations to meet her gaze. In her deep blue irises, faint glimmers of azure swayed. His eyes carefully scanned hers, moving between worry and puzzlement, yet filled with caution.

The fact that she’d spoken up when she didn’t have to meant that Kanna trusted and cared for him deeply. On the other hand, it also meant that the gates to his emotions had become so lax that she had unintentionally read into them.

To think that he’d been so easily read by her, despite being a decade older, left him feeling a bit foolish. At the same time, he felt a complicated sense of pride in Kanna’s remarkable growth.

“Um, ah, no. It might have been because I’m not feeling well from a hangover. If I said something weird and upset you, I’m really s—”

“It’s alright. You weren’t wrong.”

While maintaining eye contact, Yuder gently furrowed his brows and interrupted Kanna before she could apologize further.

“I wasn’t offended.”

“Really?”

Yuder faintly lifted the corners of his lips. Whether it was from her effort paying off, Kanna’s complexion finally brightened a little.

“Yuder, what really happened?”

Instead of answering, he studied Kanna, whose dark circles were more prominent due to her hangover, and then slowly opened his mouth.

“You said you read a negative emotion from me. Can you specify what you read?”

“Uh… well.”

“It’s okay, just be honest.”

Seemingly worried, Kanna let out a deep sigh before answering, “Alright.”

“Anxiety, worry… something like that. And… fear.”

Anxiety, worry, and fear. Yuder echoed Kanna’s words in his mind.

“At first, I thought it wasn’t coming from you. It was so strong that I felt a tingling sensation in my chest bone… But your expression remained the same as always, so…”

“…”

“Yuder, are you afraid of something?”

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“Is there anything that frightens you?” It was an unexpected question.

In his previous life, Yuder had never really considered anything to be truly frightening. After figuring out how to deal with monsters that his powers couldn’t affect, he’d stopped worrying too much about them. Physical pain or people that others found scary had never been a threat to him either.

There was a time when he was searching for a way to avert the signs of impending doom, and he frequently felt a sense of overwhelming helplessness, as if he couldn’t see what lay ahead. But could he call that fear?

Endless torture, the resultant pain, and death might have incited anger and resignation in Yuder, but they never truly instilled a sense of fear in him.

So what about now?

As he considered digging deeper into Kishiar’s sleep-talking and the peculiar connection between them, part of him did not want to. Throughout the day, his eyes had repeatedly darted to Kishiar, as if expecting the word ‘Yudrain’ to suddenly come from his lips, before he quickly averted his gaze.

Come to think of it, the feeling was similar to the hesitation he’d felt before knocking on the bedroom door where Kishiar was, ultimately turning away after much deliberation.

‘Well, technically, there’s still a door between us, separating the inside from the outside,’ Yuder mused.

His eyes briefly shifted toward the office door where Kishiar, alongside the Emperor's agents, was in a meeting, then returned to their original position.

But the weight of the resolve needed to open the door was entirely different now and then. The weight of the secrets that Yuder Aile perceived had significantly increased in the meantime.

Should he open the door?

If he opens it, to what extent should he open it?

Is opening the door the best course of action?

Could the reaction of the person he'll face after opening the door also be considered the best outcome?

Behind these unanswerable questions trailed a slight, irrational impulse to retreat from the situation. He felt strangely powerless, as if caught in a state of limbo between action and inaction.

So perhaps that was what could be considered frightening.

"Yes, there is something that scares me," Yuder slowly replied, organizing his thoughts. Kanna gave a faint smile and nodded.

"Uh-huh, of course. You're human, after all… I guess I just asked a stupid question because the Yuder I've known has always seemed so strong."

"…"

"I won't ask what it is that scares you. But as comrades and friends, it's not strange to say that I want to help if there's something troubling you, right? After all, you've done the same for me."

True to her skill in reading information, Kanna didn't probe into what Yuder was afraid of. She simply whispered her sincere desire

to help.

That earnest, yet cautious worry stirred something deep within Yuder's chest.

"Thank you, even if it's just words."

"It's not just words! I really will help you with anything, and I'll believe whatever you say. You've already given me such valuable help, after all!"

Kanna asserted her point, nodding her head emphatically.

"Sure, the Commander and the other comrades have been a big help, but my gratitude toward you is a bit more special. Do you know why?"

Yuder shook his head. Kanna wrinkled her nose as if she had expected as much and smiled. A moment later, a confession came forth, barely loud enough for anyone other than Yuder to hear.

"You see, sometimes when I'm not feeling well, I still dream of the times before I joined the Cavalry. Count Gallon was that terrifying and scary."

As she spat out the name of the person who had treated her not as a child but as a servant, ultimately intending to dispose of her, her brows twitched momentarily. However, she continued speaking with a steadfast expression.

"When you stood up for me in front of Count Gallon, it might have seemed like a small favor to you, but it allowed me to see the world anew. It wasn't just because I realized that what terrified me could be laughable to someone else."

"…"

“Back then, I was afraid that people would find out what scared me. I was terrified at the thought of everyone knowing my secret; I couldn’t even sleep. At the moment you confronted Count Gallon, I thought it was all over.”

But it wasn’t. No one ridiculed or pointed fingers at Kanna for her past fears. Count Gallon had been soundly put in his place, and since then, no one in the Cavalry had dared to speak ill of her about that time.

“So what I want to say, Yuder, is…”

Kanna gently patted the back of his hand, continuing her small smile.

“Being scared is just that, nothing more.”

The help Yuder had offered Kanna was minuscule. He had given some advice to a talented individual to join the Cavalry and had gone out of his way to thwart Count Gallon’s attempts to waste her skills.

Yet, Kanna hadn’t forgotten that event, even after all this time had passed and everything was settled. What seemed inconsequential to Yuder had been a profoundly important and terrifying experience for her. It was only now that Yuder fully realized this.

The weight of her simple words, that “being scared is just that,” unexpectedly sank into his heart.

It’s just that. No need to agonize trying to find reasons.

“I can’t speak for others, but I will never forget the weight of the fear I felt then. And as long as I don’t forget, my feelings won’t change either.”

The back of his hand, held by Kanna, felt unexpectedly warm.

“I won’t necessarily ask you to ask for help, but don’t carry it all alone. If anyone asks for help, I’ll do whatever I can. That goes for Gakane, Sister Ever, Jimmy, Hinn, Finn… Ah! And the Commander as well!”

Yuder silently looked down at his hand and closed his eyes. Suddenly, the sound of Enon’s complaints from last night overlaid Kanna’s advice, and a smile like a sigh flowed faintly from him.

“… It’s reassuring. Thank you.”

It wasn’t a vow or a pledge, just a word of trust. Yet he couldn’t understand why it made him feel so reassured.

Kanna said no more, but patted the back of his hand a few more times before suddenly turning her head.

“Huh? Sir Zuckerman and Robel are here.”

Just as she said, Nathan Zuckerman, carrying a box wrapped in cloth, was ascending the stairs right next to the window where they were standing, accompanied by a man and a woman. Robel and Marty, both with slightly tense expressions, spotted Kanna and Yuder and silently signaled their joy.

“Sir Zuckerman! It’s good to see you for the first time since the auction day. I’m glad you look well. And Robel as well. Who is this with you?”

“My name is Marty.”

“It’s my first time meeting you in person. Nice to meet you.”

As Kanna greeted them with a bright face, Robel, Marty, and Nathan Zuckerman returned the greeting. Yuder also exchanged greetings, scrutinizing the face of Nathan Zuckerman, whom he had not seen since the party.

He had heard that Zuckerman hadn’t given up chasing Nahan even after losing him. But it was hard to guess whether he had been successful or not just by looking at his face.

‘He looks perfectly healthy.’

Gone was the forced pretense of a reckless knight; the knight’s attire was now more upright and neat than ever before. While others might find such a get-up stifling, he appeared rather more comfortable and free in it.

“So what brings the three of you here?”

“Ah… we didn’t come for the same reason. The Duke… no, the Commander, wanted to meet us, so we happened to take the same path when we ran into this knight along the way.”

“So, Sir Zuckerman, you’re also here to see the Commander?”

Upon Yuder’s question, Nathan Zuckerman nodded.

“Yes.”

“I see. But the Commander is still in conversation with other visitors, so you’ll have to wait a little.”

“Understood.”

As if he had anticipated this, Nathan Zuckerman was not surprised. He continued up the stairs and took a position near them. Robel and Marty followed cautiously behind him. Kanna, her eyes falling upon the box he carried, asked with undisguised curiosity.

“So, Sir Zuckerman, may I ask what’s in the box?”

“The Commander said to bring cookies for his return.”

“Cookies…?”

“He said they’d be needed tonight.”

Kanna seemed momentarily torn, wondering if this was some sort of code or euphemism, but it appeared to be just the plain and simple truth. Yuder, maintaining his silence, decided to pose a question of his own.

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“Did your endeavor yield any results?”

The words were phrased cautiously, but the intention was clear: had the pursuit of Nahan been successful?

“Yes.”

Nathan Zuckerman replied without a change in expression.

It seemed he had found something significant enough to report to Kishiar, although the extent was unclear. Kanna, who seemed to have grasped the weight of their conversation, was about to speak when the office door opened and the agents exited, thereby cutting off their discussion.

“Hm? Nathan. It’s been a while.”

The agents outside recognized Nathan Zuckerman and greeted him. As Nathan responded curtly, Kanna whispered quietly.

“Those people seem to be looking at you more than they are at Sir Zuckerman, don’t you think?”

“…”

Perhaps Kishiar’s words had made a considerable impression on them; a few individuals, including an agent named Melina, cast odd glances at Yuder. Yuder patted Kanna’s arm reassuringly and then turned his head toward Robel, Marty, and Nathan.

“Who would like to go in first?”

“My business is not urgent, so please allow these individuals to go before me.”

“No, no, we may have been summoned, but it wasn’t specified that we should come together. So, let Marty go first…”

Since Nathan Zuckerman and Robel had deferred to each other, naturally Marty took the first turn. Yuder stared at Marty, who kept her lips tightly sealed, and slightly furrowed his brow.

‘…What’s going on?’

He hadn’t noticed when she was sandwiched between Nathan and Robel, but upon a closer look, something about Marty seemed a bit different from before.

It wasn’t merely her expression or the atmosphere she exuded.

‘It’s more like, the color of her hand looks different than usual…’

Could it be a misconception? Yuder observed her as they were led into the office.

Alone and reviewing documents after his discussion with the agents, Kishiar glanced up and greeted them with a bright smile, which even momentarily relaxed Marty, who had been tense.

“My lord.”

“Ah, Marty. A few days ago at the party, you and others provided significant aid to the Cavalry. I wanted to express my gratitude on their behalf.”

Marty, taken aback, lowered her head in denial.

“No, sir. I didn’t do anything so great as to deserve such words.”

“If confronting the intruders in the garden isn’t considered significant, what is?”

Marty and a few other non-Awakeners had acted as temporary servants at the party to monitor and report any infiltration by Nahan. The reason the damage was minimal—aside from those who died—was that they had personally identified the intruders and provided information to the Cavalry.

In particular, Marty had personally faced them and even engaged in a verbal skirmish. Surprisingly, some of Nahan’s colleagues who saw her lost their momentum and were severely shaken, and ultimately fell apart.

Even though they had come this far in compliance with Nahan’s will, it wasn’t as if they didn’t know that neither Marty nor the others were actually guilty of anything. The unexpected sight of their unharmed faces must have been quite unsettling.

That moment of wavering had ultimately been of great help in suppressing them without further casualties.

Recalling that time, a quiet Marty prompted Kishiar to ask.

“But you see, some of the other members who went out with you last time mentioned they sensed something peculiar about you. Do you have anything to say about that?”

For a moment, Yuder saw the same phenomenon occur again over Marty’s clenched fists. On the backs of her exposed hands, a vein-like blue and pale hue appeared and momentarily shimmered with a faint energy before subsiding.

Thanks to his intense concentration, he caught this fleeting change. And he was sure.

‘Could it be…?’

“Marty, have you awakened?”

At Yuder’s question, Marty seemed startled and quickly hid her hands behind her back. Her lips tightly sealed, she anxiously glanced between Kishiar and Yuder, before eventually nodding in admission.

“Yes… you’re right. I couldn’t hide it from you two.”

“So you have. Does Robel Gemson know?”

“Robel… is still unaware.”

Marty softly answered Kishiar’s question, casting a fleeting glance toward the door behind which Robel might be, and let out a heavy sigh.

Marty explained that she had first sensed an anomaly in her body when they confronted the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran on the day of the party. At first, she didn’t know what was happening, but the next day, she realized without having to ask anyone.

She had awakened the ability to temporarily drain the energy of objects she touched.

This power had partially influenced why the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran were suddenly disrupted and couldn’t fight properly.

Despite disclosing her status as an Awakener, Marty’s expression was far from jubilant. Her complex emotions were apparent from her posture as she clasped her hands behind her back.

“Are you scared of being an Awakener?”

“More than scared… No. Yes, to be honest, I’m frightened.”

Though initially hesitant, Marty eventually nodded in agreement.

“I don’t know what to do. Once you’re awakened… there’s no going back, is there?”

“Unfortunately, that seems to be the case for now.”

Kishiar gave a brief answer, then made a proposal to the visibly distraught Marty.

“We intended to recognize and assist those who helped with this matter, granting you protection and the right to stay anywhere in the Empire once this is over. But, if you’re amenable, I’d like to add another option.”

“What’s that?”

“How about staying and working at the soon-to-be-established western branch of the Cavalry?”

“The Cavalry?”

The Cavalry’s western branch would be responsible for assisting newly awakened individuals in the area they oversee, handling all related matters as a priority. Hearing Kishiar’s explanation, Marty’s eyes gradually turned serious.

“I think the Cavalry is one of the more comfortable places for awakened individuals. You don’t need to make an immediate decision; you can stay until you’re ready to choose.”

“I appreciate the generous offer… I’d like to consider it more.”

“Very well.”

Before she left, Kishiar casually imparted a few words.

“While you may find it sad to have become awakened, remember that this isn’t the sum total of who you are. Someone will still cherish

and love you, awakened or not. I would have made this offer regardless of your status.”

“…Thank you.”

With a contemplative expression, Marty maintained her silence for a moment, then said her farewells and exited the room.

Robel, who followed in after, looked increasingly tense, perhaps sensing that something was off with Marty’s expression. Kishiar extended his gratitude to Robel for his assistance and inquired about his future plans.

“I’m content just seeing Marty again. Although I can’t immediately return to how things were with her… I still want to be wherever she is. Ah! Of course, I’ll assist with whatever is required of me in the Cavalry.”

“You mentioned wanting to find your former comrades. Have you managed that?”

“Yes.”

Robel had briefly visited his friends from the Star of Nagran village, who were moderates like himself, to find out about their whereabouts.

“It seems that before causing a major incident, they gathered everyone from my comrades to the villagers and sent them to another location. They didn’t tell me where, but I’d like to believe they weren’t lying; they are all Awakeners, after all.”

“That’s fortunate, then.”

Kishiar responded evenly, scrutinizing Robel’s face before breaking into a smile.

“Robel Gemson. While there are people like you on the Star of Nagran, there are also those like Nahan. I am interested in information about the Star of Nagran, but it’s not easily accessible from the outside. You all seem to be very cautious of us.”

“Ah… Yes.”

Robel answered nervously.

“If you want information from us, I will do my best to provide it, although I know very little. I joined later and spent a brief period in the south before returning to the west; my life has been pretty mundane.”

“We can talk about that later. But I would like you to answer one thing first.”

“Go ahead.”

“What do you think the Star of Nagran is like?”

Robel wore an exceedingly complex expression. His face showed that he was grappling with how to answer. However, it didn’t take him long to come to a conclusion.

“When I first visited, the place felt ordinary. It was just a village where people rallied around a sage to protect each other. But now… I’m not sure.”

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With an inscrutable expression, Robel began his story.

He was one of the Awakeners who had surfaced not long after the Red Stone fell. Fleeing from his family and relatives who feared him, he eventually left his hometown. After much hardship, he met other Awakeners who helped him, and that place turned out to be the Star of Nagran.

When he first joined, the Star of Nagran was significantly smaller than it was now. To show his commitment, Robel met the Sage, and it was then that he first learned of Nahan.

“…Are you saying you met him back then?” Yuder asked, his eyes widening in surprise at this unexpected revelation from Robel’s story.

“Yes, but only briefly. Back then, he was famous for blindly following the Sage. Rumor has it that the Sage saved him when he was on the brink of death.”

According to Robel, Hosanna had also been with Nahan since that time. Robel did not know when they first joined the Star of Nagran since both had arrived before him. He had merely heard murmurs that the Sage had rescued them from a city near the southern desert even before naming the group.

At that time, they were concerned that if too many joined the Star of Nagran, it would attract attention. So, they were just establishing bases. Robel, being from the western region and wishing to live quietly, headed toward a base situated within the Great Sarain Forest.

Since then, he had lived as peacefully as possible, occasionally hearing news from other bases. Rumors reached him that Nahan was actively involved in rescuing and recruiting other Awakeners, but Robel considered it none of his business.

Neither the formation of the Cavalry nor the gradual shift in public perception of the Awakeners had anything to do with him.

But all that changed due to this recent incident.

“The Star of Nagran as I knew it wasn’t really an organization. It was just a place where people who wanted to survive could help each other. The Sage encouraged us to empower ourselves for self-defense, but never told us to misuse our abilities against others.”

Robel had met the Sage only once when he first joined, but he held him in high esteem. Despite knowing little more than what he had just revealed, the sincerity in his eyes when he spoke was undeniable.

In contrast to Gayle and Doyle, the brothers who had been reticent about discussing the Sage, Robel was relatively open. Although his less-guarded demeanor indicated he wasn’t deeply involved in the inner workings of the organization, the genuine reverence he showed was identical.

‘It seems evident that the Sage, unlike Nahan, tends to keep information about himself concealed. Could he be someone capable of leading people?’

“Even if I could return there after all that’s happened, making enemies of those I considered comrades, I have no intention of doing so… But I do believe the Sage is a genuinely good person. Whether he knows about this situation or not, I can’t say.”

Well, did the Sage really not know about what was going on?

Whether or not the Sage was a good person as Robel believed, Yuder trusted his experiences from his past life a bit more. Even if many things had changed in this life, the internal strife beginning to unravel within the Star of Nagran had long been evident.

Nahan, who once blindly followed the Sage.

The Sage, who knew Nahan was going down a dangerously aggressive path but did nothing to intervene.

‘Whether he can’t or won’t intervene, I still don’t know…’

Something ambiguously connected between the two must have been the key to the internal strife and destruction in their past lives. Yuder’s experience and intuition whispered that only by knowing the truth could they protect themselves and prevent Nahan from doing greater harm.

‘And beyond that, I also want to find out if the identity of the so-called Sage has any connection to the person I met in my past life.’

“Thank you for sharing your honest opinion. It will be very helpful,” Kishiar said, offering a grateful smile.

“If there’s anything more you wish to say, feel free to do so now.”

“Ah, in that case… please forgive me, but I have something to add.”

With hands clenched tightly in tension, Robel cautiously began to speak.

“I am aware that you chose not to swiftly mete out punishment to the individuals captured by the Cavalry but instead conducted thorough investigations to determine the severity of their crimes, and even provided medical treatment for their injuries. Since learning this, I’ve wondered how things might have been different had I not

fled from Great Sarain Forest and instead met with the Cavalry to exchange words. Now that I know more, I regret that decision."

The reason the Cavalry had begun chasing after the Star of Nagran was to find Nahan. They had no interest in indiscriminately capturing or punishing ordinary Awakeners simply because they belonged to the same organization.

However, people like Robel were not well-informed about what Nahan had done. They only knew that in the usual course of trying to rescue Awakeners, they had clashed with the Cavalry and casualties had ensued, putting the Star of Nagran in peril.

"Since this incident, I've felt firsthand a drastic change in how people from the West view Awakeners. I would never have known this without your help. Yet, the majority of people within the Star of Nagran are still unaware of this reality," Robel said, bowing politely.

After Robel left, Kishiar sank into contemplation. Yuder replayed their recent conversation, observing Kishiar's expression.

"The next in line is Sir Zuckerman… shall I call for him?"

"Before that, may I ask what you thought when you first became an Awakener?"

Instead of a reply, an unexpected question came back. Yuder paused, then searched his memory.

'What was it like back then?'

Unlike Kishiar, for whom only about two years had passed since Awakeners first appeared, for Yuder it had happened well over a decade ago. Recalling those times took effort.

Before awakening, Yuder was somewhat bored with his monotonous life in the mountains. Sometimes, his curiosity to see

the wider world gripped him, but with no clear purpose, he simply continued on with his daily routine.

Things were much the same right after he Awakened. Initially, he was a bit startled, but with no family to witness his powers, there was no one to react. Life went on as usual. At most, cutting down trees and traversing mountains became a bit easier.

Until he heard about the recruitment for the Cavalry, Yuder had spent the two years post-awakening aimlessly wandering alone, devoid of excitement.

‘I’d only heard rumors that many were Awakeners, but since I was the only Awakener around me, I didn’t even think my powers were anything special.’

“I had no particular thoughts.”

“Typical of my assistant.”

After long contemplation, Kishiar chuckled as if he were joking upon hearing Yuder’s conclusion.

“You probably already know, but for me, that was a tremendous blessing and a lifeline. But it might not be for others.”

“…”

“Listening to his story reminded me of the content of the diary I read yesterday.”

At the sudden mention of the diary related to the works of the first Duke Tain, the corners of Yuder’s eyelashes subtly quivered.

“Wasn’t that a time when magic had only recently started to take shape? The diary contained some speculation about the confusion

that mages must have experienced. Strikingly, what we've heard isn't much different."

It was an entirely unexpected line of thought.

What did it mean that the initial experiences of mages, documented in a diary, mirrored the experiences of today's Awakeners?

"After having this conversation today… I feel like I need to read that diary once more."

Kishiar looked at Yuder as he spoke.

"Would you like to go through it together tonight?"

Was this an offer based on Yuder's displayed interest in the diary?

Slower than yesterday, yet still profoundly, Yuder's heart began to beat.

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All day, he had acted as if the events of the previous night held no significance. Yet, as the sun began to set, he spoke words that held a sense of gravity.

Yuder’s gaze moved beyond Kishiar’s back to the slowly darkening sky, then settled back onto Kishiar’s eyes. Just as he was about to speak, his thoughts swirling with what Kanna and Enon had said, the sound of a knock on the door broke the tension.

“Let’s discuss it after we wrap up today’s last duty.”

Kishiar softly muttered and offered Yuder a slight smile before turning his head. Nathan Zuckerman entered the room.

“I’ve brought what you asked for, my lord.”

Unaware of the complex and delicate exchange of emotions that had just occurred, the man solemnly placed a box on the table.

“Is everything there?”

“Yes. Both items are present.”

Pleased with the answer, Kishiar playfully commended his dutiful subordinate.

“Well done, Nathan, especially considering the time constraints. Anything else to report?”

“We’ve found traces of the one we were chasing.”

A new development regarding Nahan emerged. Instead of pondering the complexity of his thoughts, Yuder focused on Nathan’s

words.

“As you already know from previous reports, the individual evaded me and dove into an underground sewer. The many exits made it unclear where he had escaped to, but after a thorough search, we found evidence near the north gate.”

“The north?”

“Yes. Please look at this.”

Nathan Zuckerman pulled out a small piece of cloth from his pocket. The deep blue fabric was torn, as if caught on something, and was filled with dark bloodstains that made it hard to discern its original color.

“This was found by those chasing the merchants who escaped from the secret auction house. Initially, they thought it was the merchants’ belongings, but they brought it to me because it was soaked in blood and water.”

The southern merchants who had fled from the secret auction had used a hidden passage leading north. Nathan Zuckerman, upon seeing the torn piece of fabric discovered near the north gate, quickly recognized it as belonging to Nahan, whom he had fought.

“It’s rather coincidental that this cloth was found in the same direction the merchants had fled.”

Hearing Nathan’s report, Kishiar’s eyes turned icy.

“An enemy of an enemy could well become a friend under certain circumstances. We must consider the possibility that the merchants and Nahan crossed paths and aided each other during their escape.”

When they had encountered each other at the security management team that day, the southern merchants and Nahan’s

group had faced each other. The southern merchants falsely believed that Nahan's group had robbed their auction storage, while Nahan and his associates harbored open hostility toward the merchants, who were minions of Duke Tain and Baron Willhem.

Yet, the fleeing southern merchants were not genuinely loyal to Duke Tain and were also Awakeners.

Although the likelihood of them running into each other while escaping in the same direction was low, considering the similar timeframe, Kishiar felt that the possibility couldn't be entirely ruled out. Nathan Zuckerman seemed to share this cautious view.

"Given Nahan's capabilities, it's entirely possible that he could have influenced not just the merchants, but also others he encountered, to aid him," Nathan spoke cautiously.

"That's more likely, but we should keep all possibilities open for now."

"Yes."

"Send that piece of cloth to Kanna Wand as soon as possible. Make sure she also gathers information from the surrounding area where it was found. As for you, focus your search to the south."

"Understood."

It was suspected that the contraband goods from Duke Tain were originally intended to be partly auctioned off, and the rest, including human trafficking victims, would be headed south where illegal fighting arenas were rampant. Kishiar seemed to think that the southern merchants who had fled with just a sack of drug powder would still be heading in that direction.

And Yuder's thoughts were not much different from Kishiar's.

‘They initially said they met Duke Tain while trading in the South, and they’re originally from the southern lands. They would naturally head south.’

Furthermore, according to what Robel had said earlier, the headquarters of the Star of Nagran, where he had gone to meet the sage before relocating to the western base, was also in the south. If Nahan, who had escaped alone and survived despite severe injuries, was still alive, he too would most likely be heading south.

“Do you have anything else to report?”

“No, that’s all.”

“Then finally, you’ll have some time to rest. Take your time preparing to return to the capital and try to rest for a while.”

It was the first time Yuder saw Kishiar openly telling Nathan Zuckerman to rest. Nathan’s fine, dark eyebrows moved subtly upward. The knight, who had endured hardship from his reckless behavior, seemed less than thrilled to be told to rest.

“I’ve had plenty of rest since I came here…”

“Rest when you’re told to rest. You pursued Nahan relentlessly for days after fighting him alone. It’s time to step back. Don’t underestimate that person’s capabilities, especially since you’ve seen what he was like in the past.”

“I’ve only seen it, so it had no effect on me,” Nathan retorted.

Yuder’s gaze shifted to Nathan Zuckerman, understanding why Kishiar had insisted that his adjutant take some time off.

He had heard that Nathan had faced both Nahan and Hosanna simultaneously and yet did not sustain a single significant injury.

However, that didn’t mean he hadn’t been subjected to Nahan’s illusions.

Nahan’s ability forcibly opens a person’s mind and shows them all sorts of horrifying illusions, causing mental collapse. Sometimes mental scars were harder to recover from than physical wounds.

Though Yuder didn’t know what ‘past’ illusions Nathan had seen, if Kishiar was that concerned, there must be a reason.

“It’s your judgment that it had no effect. This is my judgment, as someone who has personally experienced that man’s abilities. It’s not an excessive worry. I presume my assistant would agree.”

Suddenly, the arrow of conversation was aimed at Yuder. Come to think of it, all three people present had experienced Nahan’s powers. Yuder met Nathan Zuckerman’s eyes and quietly expressed his agreement.

“…Yes, I think it would be wise to heed the Commander’s advice for the sake of future operations.”

“Understood.”

Finally, Nathan Zuckerman conceded and let out a small sigh, along with a salute. The broad shoulders of the knight, who had come to report on his mission activities and unexpectedly gained a period of rest, somehow looked a bit deflated.

“Well, that wraps up today’s business.”

Kishiar rose from his seat, turning his eyes towards the deepening twilight outside the window.

“Let’s head back.”

“Commander, are you returning to your quarters?”

The guards by the door greeted Kishiar in loud voices.

“Yes. You guys should head back too; it’s time for a delicious dinner. You’ve worked hard.”

“Oh, not at all! Be careful when you go out the main gate; some rowdy folks are still around.”

“Are they still out there? They’re quite persistent. Very well.”

What the soldiers were referring to were the servants of nobles, who had surrounded Baron Willhem’s mansion since the day after the party, wanting to meet Kishiar. These people were sent by the relatives of those who had been imprisoned due to crimes connected with Baron Willhem or for participating in the secret auction.

Originally, after the incident, various indirect pressures and bribes were expected to flood in toward Kishiar and the Cavalry, causing significant disruptions to the investigations and daily work. However, Kishiar, without batting an eye, seemed to have preemptively anticipated this. He sent them all away and, instead, posted a large notice in front of the mansion and the security force’s headquarters.

“After this point in time, anyone obstructing the investigation under the pretext of saving criminals will have to meet with the Cavalry Commander in person to clarify the intent behind their actions. Those who are confident should step forward and express their views in court.”

While the nobles badmouthed Duke Peletta for his outrageous behavior, none dared to directly confront Kishiar, especially after the rumors had spread about his bold actions at the party.

So, all they could do was to send their servants to lament their grievances outside the main gate.

Yuder followed behind Kishiar as they walked through the garden. Traces of the battle that had not yet been cleaned up were still evident throughout the mansion, now vacated by Baron Willhem and his family.

“Have you gathered much information about the task we decided to perform tonight?”

Kishiar, who was walking a step ahead, threw the question over his shoulder. Yuder tensely sealed his lips before nonchalantly opening them to reply.

“Yes.”

“Hmm? You seem a little less confident than usual.”

The tone was playful and teasing.

“No, that’s not the case.”

“Do you think you can handle it?”

“…I’ll have to try to know, but I intend to do my best to ensure no harm comes to you, Commander.”

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Chapter 443

“So, what about the question I asked earlier?”

The question followed naturally, like water flowing downstream.

Feeling Kishiar’s gaze waiting for an answer to his suggestion to read the diary of the First Duke Tain once again, Yuder paused for a moment before slowly responding.

“If I complete the task successfully, I’d like to do as you suggested.”

Although he’d conditioned it on completing the task successfully, Yuder’s willingness to accept Kishiar’s extended hand remained unchanged.

And so did the various meanings that lay within that commitment.

“Well, whether that task comes to an end or not, I consider it a separate issue. But if that makes you more comfortable, so be it.”

Before the playful retort could conclude, the back gate of the mansion, their destination, appeared. Yuder, who had expected the place to be deserted as usual, suddenly widened his eyes upon spotting a familiar shadow.

‘…Enon?’

It was indeed Enon, no illusion. Leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, the man turned his gaze upon hearing footsteps. The somewhat softened smile that briefly crossed his face upon seeing Yuder disappeared.

A guess at why Enon would be here at this time crossed Yuder's mind, casting a brief shadow over his thoughts.

'Could it be… Has he really come to reveal his identity to Kishiar? Here and now?'

If he were alone, he could have asked directly, but conveniently, Kishiar was also present. With an expression that seemed to say he knew Yuder would come, Enon approached. Kishiar, stepping forward, asked with a smile,

"Did you come to see Yuder? Coincidentally, my assistant and I have urgent matters to attend to. If it's a long conversation you're after, it might be difficult right now."

"No, my visit today isn't aimed at him. And it's not a long matter either."

Bowing his head in a perfunctory greeting, Enon's gaze squarely met Kishiar's. Recognizing that Enon's business was with him, Kishiar's eyes widened briefly before narrowing in deep interest.

"Oh? Intriguing. What's the matter?"

Yuder involuntarily closed his eyes. But the answer that came a moment later was a bit different from what he had expected.

"I heard that a rather interesting item was unearthed from the underground dungeon of the security management team yesterday."

"Did you hear that from my assistant?"

"Yes."

Yuder opened his eyes again. The two men were conversing without looking in his direction.

“True. An intriguing historical document was indeed discovered. So, what about it?”

“I would like to take a look at it.”

Enon’s attitude was surprisingly casual for someone addressing a Duke and a Commander. Yet, there was something about him that made such a demeanor feel oddly acceptable.

Kishiar, too, was unfazed by Enon’s casualness and simply stared back at him.

“…You might know that the document is a complex mixture of Gore script and early Imperial languages. Even I find parts of it difficult to read quickly. Are you saying you can read it?”

“If I couldn’t, I wouldn’t have come.”

“Remarkable. These days, it’s rare to find a temple teaching Gore.”

After responding with what seemed to be genuine admiration, Kishiar’s eyes deepened further.

“So, why do you absolutely need to read it?”

Though the conversation seemed light, the atmosphere for those watching was far from it. Enon, who briefly glanced at Yuder’s frozen expression, swallowed hard and let out a short sigh, as if trying to hold back an immense tension within.

Yuder sensed it—a gaze that seemed to read even the emotions he himself wasn’t fully aware of.

“Watch closely,” it seemed like Yuder whispered, shifting his lips. Before he could express any doubt, Enon spoke up without hesitation.

“To speak before answering your question, it was I who informed that fellow about the Protection of Blood hidden in the fourth floor of the underground dungeon.”

“…”

“How would an ignoramus in magic suddenly know that information? I assumed that you would already be aware of what I’ve done during my monster research. Am I wrong?”

In response to Enon’s counter-question, Kishiar, who had remained silent until now, calmly nodded his head.

“Yes, you’re right. I’ve already heard about your contributions this time. You’re on par with Hellem, who received praise as one of the most outstanding monster researchers in history. No, you might even surpass her. It was not easy to comprehend that a mere apothecary could achieve such knowledge and results.”

Kishiar had already heard praise about Enon’s skills from Hellem. But hearing it like this gave it a whole new meaning. Regardless of Yuder’s spine stiffening with tension, Enon showed no signs of surprise or confusion. He asked, as casually as if he were serving a customer in his apothecary.

“Is there anything else?”

“Nathan mentioned that your casual advice and medicine helped him break through a training barrier. Mick also reported seeing traces of time in you that one would expect to see in ancient trees. You display an abundance of such traits, usually only visible in centenarians. When asked, you admitted it was just as it seemed.”

This was news even to Yuder.

“What on earth have you been up to all this time without my knowing?” The question was uncomfortable, but Enon simply

ignored Yuder’s gaze. His face suggested that he had anticipated such a response.

‘So when he said yesterday that revealing his identity would make work easier… it wasn’t just a casual comment.’

“Well, if you’ve heard that much, there’s no need for further explanation.”

“So, what conclusion have you come to based on the reports you’ve heard so far?” Enon looked at Kishiar, who slowly opened his mouth.

“A person who’s neither a mage, a swordsman, nor a priest but has profound knowledge in all these fields, bearing the passage of time even older than an ancient tree. It’s hard to guess your true identity as a mere human, but…”

His voice trailed off, resuming after a moment.

“It makes sense to consider you could be one of the other races that once existed in this land.”

At that moment, a strong wind brushed past them.

Yuder clenched his fist, suppressing his wildly beating heart.

The answer that Kishiar arrived at, based solely on the bit of information that Enon had let slip, was eerily close to the truth. A faint, inscrutable smile appeared and disappeared on Enon’s face upon hearing the answer.

“Well, you’re not exactly wrong.”

“Hmm. If this isn’t the complete answer, the world is indeed a vast place. I need to improve further.”

Kishiar shrugged his shoulders and chuckled, putting forth his response with dry humor.

‘Is he not surprised?’

Though Kishiar was skilled at concealing his emotions, Yuder hadn’t expected him to maintain such composure during this astonishing conversation. He wondered what the man was thinking, but all he could see was the back and the side profile of someone who was one step ahead of him.

At that moment, Enon’s gaze briefly shifted back to Yuder. His yellow eyes, brimming with an inscrutable meaning, met Yuder’s before returning to Kishiar.

“Let me be clear. The reason I came here is because of that guy, and unless something changes, I intend to continue living peacefully as I have been. I assume the Commander would share the same sentiment, correct?”

Kishiar responded to Enon’s somewhat probing, somewhat confirming statement with a flawless smile and an extended hand for a handshake.

“Exactly. I appreciate your taking the initiative to clarify that.”

There was no explicit confirmation of trust exchanged between Enon and Kishiar. Yet both seemed to understand that everything that needed to be verified or discussed had been settled, nodding their heads in unison.

“In that case, I’ll send over the item I brought yesterday tomorrow. For me, it has no value beyond that of a historical artifact.”

“Please do so.”

‘…Is that it?’

Really?

While Yuder was swallowing his bewilderment, Enon shook hands with Kishiar one more time, turned without a trace of hesitation, and brushed past him. As he did, he whispered something softly.

"…"

For a long time, Yuder watched Enon's retreating back.

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Chapter 444

“Wouldn’t it be better to start with a meal?”

Kishiar, heading towards the simple food and wine that the servants had prearranged in their lodging, looked back at Yuder and asked. The astonishing conversation he’d just had with Enon seemed to have already vanished into the distance.

Yuder glanced at the table Kishiar had pointed to and shook his head.

“…I’m fine.”

His appetite was far from roused given the circumstances. The bread that emitted a delicious aroma, the fresh fruit—right now, they all looked no different than clods of dirt.

However, Kishiar was not the type of man to be deterred by a refusal.

“It’s better not to skip meals, even if you’re not hungry. Don’t tell me you’re going to let me eat alone?”

“…”

“Really?”

Yuder found it impossible to ignore the smile that softened Kishiar’s otherwise stern face.

What on Earth is he thinking?

With a trace of self-reproach, Yuder took a seat across from him. Without any hesitation, Kishiar picked up a slice of bread soaked in

honey and apple and passed it over. Initially, Yuder planned to eat just that one slice and get up, but as soon as he finished it, another piece of bread appeared before him. When he hesitated, Kishiar subtly shook the bread as if suggesting his arm was getting tired. Eventually, Yuder took the second piece.

After finishing the second slice, a third and then a fourth followed.

“…”

As Yuder silently accepted morsel after morsel from Kishiar, who himself took large bites of his own share, something peculiar began to happen.

The taste started to come alive on his tongue.

First, it was the sweetness of honey. Then, the creamy richness of the white filling. Next, the tart crunchiness of the fruit. And finally, when he could even discern the saltiness sprinkled atop the butter, Yuder felt as if something that had been rigidly frozen inside him had astonishingly melted away.

The man responsible for that melting was, of course, the one sitting before him.

When Kishiar skillfully split the last remaining piece of bread and handed it over, Yuder accepted it but didn’t put it in his mouth.

Instead, what escaped his lips was a question, now noticeably drained of vigor.

“…Weren’t you surprised?”

“Why should I be surprised when I didn’t even guess correctly?”

The response came back smoothly, as though he had been waiting for this moment.

“Weren’t you concerned it could be dangerous?”

“The person before me has already provided sufficient proof of trustworthiness.”

The hand holding the last piece of bread trembled for a moment.

As if he had waited a long time for this very response, Kishiar’s eyes met Yuder’s.

“You don’t need to know everything about someone to be with them. Knowing their character and intentions from what they’ve shown you can be enough.”

You don’t need to know everything about someone to be with them.

The weight of that statement, unmistakably directed at him, struck Yuder like a hammer.

As he stared into the dark pupils of the man in front of him, unable to blink, Kishiar gave a soft smile.

“It took a day of waiting, but finally, my assistant is truly seeing me.”

“…”

“It took quite a while.”

No, Yuder had been observing him all along.

He had thought he was observing, but a voice deep in his heart quietly raised a question.

Could he truly say, with confidence, that he had?

Had he truly faced Kishiar throughout the day without merely ‘observing’ him?

Yuder couldn’t answer that question.

Then what had he thought he had been seeing of Kishiar today?

One thing was certain: Kishiar had neither forgotten last night’s events nor was he indifferent to them, as Yuder had initially believed.

“Were you waiting for me to speak first?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me first?”

“You already know why I didn’t.”

Kishiar laughed quietly.

“There’s no point in forcing an unwanted answer from someone. Especially not from you.”

In essence, Kishiar was saying he had not acted because he knew Yuder would not want him to.

“See, by waiting, you spoke first. So waiting for a day has its merits.”

He said it was enough, but Yuder didn’t feel the same way.

“I might not have lived up to your expectations and faith.”

“There’s no chance of that. Fortunately, I have plenty of time to wait.”

It was a skill, being able to joke about waiting indefinitely for someone to open up. And it made Yuder feel all the more foolish for

being easily swayed by such words.

As Yuder exhaled, an unbearable heat surged from behind his eyes. Yuder spoke, looking downward.

“I can never truly match up to you, Commander.”

“Interesting. That’s a thought I have every day when I look at my assistant.”

Grinning, Kishiar leaned his chin on his hand.

“I don’t know what’s making the assistant so hesitant, but if it has anything to do with me, there’s something I’d like to say.”

Yuder should have asked what it was, but his tongue seemed paralyzed. Captivated by Kishiar’s piercing gaze, he listened.

“Do you know that worrying is something that you can only do about things that you ultimately consider to be that important?”

“…”

“If the one who has taken my heart worries because of me, then I am a man who would be more than happy with that. I am quite the opportunist. Ah, did you already know that?”

The one who had taken Kishiar’s heart.

Yuder’s thoughts stalled, pierced by an unexpected strike. Words that Kishiar had once uttered in the depths of the Great Sarain Forest flashed like wildfire across his mind.

‘Why bring that up now?’

As Yuder lost his words, Kishiar smiled gently with curved eyes.

“A joke, perhaps? But I’m serious.”

He had been closely watching every nuance of Yuder’s reactions.

“Anyway, the fact that someone as unreadable as my assistant would worry enough to observe me through others gives me hope. It may be a wild guess, but it seemed that way earlier.”

Although he called it a wild guess, his eyes conveyed anything but. And in reality, it was far from a mere guess.

Yuder recalled the last words left by Enon.

I’ve shown you everything. Now do as you please.

Enon had displayed his true identity—a secret difficult to understand logically—as an offering, showing Yuder how Kishiar would react. Thanks to that, Yuder could initiate the conversation, and for that he was grateful.

But Kishiar had also sensed another hidden agenda in that conversation. His manner of almost acknowledging it while pretending not to was truly like him.

In truth, what Yuder sensed wasn’t solely hope. Yuder faintly discerned traces of other carefully concealed emotions within Kishiar’s smile.

“Still, the fact that he only mentioned hope could mean…”

“Don’t overthink things. No matter how strong or exceptional one is, everyone needs time now and then. If talking with me makes you feel better, then do so. If not, that’s fine too.”

A thin breath escaped from between Yuder’s lips.

If today had been a game of tactical chess between them, Yuder felt he had just been utterly defeated.

‘I’ve never actually won in my previous life anyway,’ he mused.

Finally, he exhaled all the air he had been holding and released the words that had been lurking even deeper within him.

“As you said, I have indeed been pondering over matters concerning you today.”

Words that had been excruciatingly difficult to utter felt astonishingly insignificant once they were out.

Suppressing his emotions, Yuder then threw out another question.

“What do you think I’ve been worried about?”

He wanted to find out even the aspects he had not been curious about until now. What did Kishiar think of him? Kishiar had come close to guessing about the true nature of Enon, so what were his thoughts about Yuder?

Catching Yuder’s gaze, filled with such implications, Kishiar soon opened his mouth to reply.

“Well, the dream I claimed to have had last night and the sleep talk that I don’t remember could be the most likely culprits, but I can’t be certain.”

It seemed Kishiar had also judged that Yuder’s attitude had markedly changed from that moment. Yuder cast another question while staring at the swirling dark-red liquid in the wine glass Kishiar was idly holding.

“You mentioned that you sometimes sleep like that when you’re tired. Do you recall how often that happens or when it started?”

“It’s difficult to keep track of all the dreams, so I can’t give you an exact answer. However… there was one instance where I slept so deeply that I had a nightmare after someone woke me up.”

“When was that?”

“When you applied to join the Cavalry. Nathan thought I had physically collapsed due to overwork.”

‘When I applied to join the Cavalry…’

Coincidentally, that was also when Yuder became aware that he had returned to the past. As he recalled this, a cold shiver ran down his spine.

Could this really be a coincidence?

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“There have been a few times since then when I’ve woken up with a vague feeling of having had a rather unpleasant dream. No one else was beside me when I slept and woke up, so I can’t say for sure if there’s a connection.”

“Do you have no recollection whatsoever of what you dreamt?”

“None at all.”

Kishiar nodded with a mild expression. He said that when Nathan Zuckerman woke him up, he did not sleep talk like this time.

Since he couldn’t remember, it was hard to say with certainty whether these events were related. But Yuder had a compelling reason to think otherwise.

“Yudrain.”

His train of thought abruptly halted at the voice that seemed to read his mind. His fingers twitched noticeably, but the shock wasn’t as intense as it was the night before.

“So, that’s the cause of your concerns.”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed as he studied Yuder’s expression. Yuder thought he would naturally ask for an explanation, but Kishiar’s question was about something entirely different.

“Do you know what was inside the box Nathan brought earlier?”

“Cookies, or so I heard.”

Puzzled by the unexpected question, Yuder watched as Kishiar pulled a box wrapped in cloth from the corner of the table. Unfolding the cloth, he revealed what was inside.

“There are cookies, but… that’s not all.”

Kishiar opened the box, and along with the carefully wrapped cookies, an old book was revealed. It was the same book used for learning the Gore language.

“If it’s not meaningless gibberish, I felt you should know its true meaning. It felt similar to Gore, so I reached out to Baron Koelt.”

If it had been the capital, Kishiar could have used his own book, but they were in the west. Fortunately, Baron Koelt, who had recently established contact with them, was a scholar proficient in Gore and had the book Kishiar was looking for.

Yuder recalled that Nathan Zuckerman had reported that he brought ‘both things’ in that box to Kishiar. He had assumed it was merely different types of cookies, but he was wrong. The truth lay here.

Even without Yuder saying anything, Kishiar was already moving so swiftly ahead.

‘And if I had said nothing, he would have kept everything he discovered buried in silence.’

Kishiar began flipping through the book. He seemed to know exactly where to look, and Yuder did not stop him. Instead, he thought about the name that had once been his.

Yudrain. That name was a gift he had received before becoming the Commander of the Cavalry in his past life. To be honest, until recently, he had nearly forgotten all about it. Had he not heard

Kishiar mention it in a dream, he might have continued to forget who had given him that name and how he had received it.

‘I heard in the dream that it was made in Gore.’

However, he had not heard its meaning. Even looking back on his past memories, he couldn’t distinctly recall what the name had meant. Not that he was particularly curious, given that it was a name he had abandoned and had no intention of reclaiming.

‘If I hadn’t heard it again last night, I could have buried it forever.’

He felt bitter. And then, the faces of those who had mockingly accused him of intentionally changing his name to noble-sounding to erase his past flooded his mind. Yuder ceased his reminiscence there.

Normally, receiving a name was considered an honorable gift and a source of pride. People assumed that Emperor Katchian had bestowed the name upon Yuder, and Yuder did nothing to correct that assumption.

However, the man who had given him that name was right in front of him, flipping through a book.

Could he, who had long carried the name without fully understanding its meaning, rediscover its essence now? Amidst a sensation as if someone were gently tickling his gut, Yuder silently waited for Kishiar to speak again.

“… There’s really no word that fits exactly,” Kishiar finally said.

“Is that so?”

“If you think of it as a single word, yes.”

Setting the book down where Yuder could see, Kishiar pointed to a specific section with a peculiar smile.

“In the Gore language, ‘ra’ serves as a connector between words, much like the word ‘and’. Assuming the ‘ra’ in Yudrain has that function, and we look at the original forms of the surrounding characters… do you see?”

Above Kishiar’s fingertip, the word for ‘beginning,’ ‘Yud,’ was visible.

“Yud, which means ‘beginning.’ And on this side, ‘In’ means ‘end.’ When ‘ra’ connects them…”

“Beginning and end?”

Muttering these unfamiliar words, Kishiar chuckled softly.

“Literal translation would suggest so. However, considering the semantics of the two words and ancient grammar, it could translate differently. Do you understand what I’m getting at?”

“…”

“Eternity.”

The beginning and the end, connected by the letter in between, could signify eternity. Even though Kishiar continued to speak more elaborately afterward, nothing more registered in Yuder’s mind.

Hadn’t he said to cherish the name, as it contained good meaning?

The memory of Kishiar’s dry voice, almost like a joke from a dream, suddenly resurfaced. In front of the meaning of his name that he had come to understand after such a long time, Yuder kept silent for a moment before closing his eyes.

A warmth he had never felt before, not even when cauterized with hot iron, pulsed through his head in sync with his heartbeat. He couldn’t suppress the sensation.

“Commander.”

“Hm?”

Yuder interrupted Kishiar’s words.

“Why such a grave face? Did my conjecture miss the mark again?”

“Do you remember, in the Great Sarain Forest, you mentioned you had seen something connected to me?”

Kishiar’s expression, once tinged with levity, changed for a moment. Yuder looked into his eyes and whispered softly.

“I never mentioned it, but I also saw something similar recently.”

When fighting against a southern merchant in the pitch-black darkness of a secret warehouse, a thread-like something appeared to guide him as he desperately searched for Kishiar, whose location was unknown. Without any explanation, he knew that Kishiar was at the other end of that thread, and indeed, he was.

“And I believe that mysterious connection between you and me…”

His dissipating voice even sounded distant to him. Yuder cleared his throat and finished what he was saying.

“…might be connected to that dream of yours. Otherwise, you couldn’t possibly speak of things only I know about, even while you were asleep.”

“…”

He couldn’t say everything, but this much would surely give Kishiar something to think about.

“I hesitated because I was afraid the truth would be confirmed.”

Yuder gave a faint smile, his face reflected in his red eyes.

“Nothing else in the world scares me; only you, Commander, make me feel afraid.”

Swallowing the deep-seated emotions and indescribable memories within him, Yuder laid bare his somber confession.

“Perhaps, you are the only one who could make me this way.”

Before, and even now.

In the silence, a droplet of water trickled down the glass Kishiar had been drinking from. The droplet slid slowly then quickly down the cup filled with cold liquor, finally dropping from the handle onto the white lace tablecloth, leaving a small, dark stain.

Perhaps the fear Yuder Aile felt for Kishiar La Orr began in much the same way. What was thought to be a small stain grew larger, eventually altering the original color so profoundly that it became impossible to hide.

Yuder waited quietly for a response. After unburdening himself to some extent, he felt like a condemned man awaiting the executioner’s blade. Just as a new droplet began to form on the outside of the glass, a low voice broke the silence.

“May I come to you?”

Across a single table, their eyes met. The moment Yuder gave a slight nod, Kishiar rose from his seat. The chair toppled back and rolled on the floor, but no one paid it any mind.

Approaching, he pulled Yuder into an embrace without a word, a strong scent wafting through the air, heady enough to make one feel dizzy.

“Comm—”

Before the word could escape his lips, deeply overlapping mouths silenced him. After a long time, the man who had imprisoned Yuder between the chair and his embrace finally pulled back, whispering softly through their mingled breaths.

“There’s only one person who could make me this way, too.”

At the sound of his deep, husky voice, goosebumps rose on Yuder’s skin.

“And that person is right here in front of me.”

Strangely, it was then that he felt he truly understood Kanna’s words.

The deeper fear dug its claws in, the more it blinded one from seeing the path ahead. He couldn’t understand why he hadn’t noticed that, when you peeled back a layer, the other person was not so different from himself.

Every aspect of Kishiar La Orr had been directed toward him with such blind faith from the very beginning.

What he had hesitated to say, avoided so endlessly as if it were a lie, now surged up as emotions he had suppressed for so long erupted in a fiery whirlpool.

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Yuder reached out to caress Kishiar’s cheek, as if guided by his emotions. The man caught Yuder’s wrist and buried his face in the palm of Yuder’s hand. Lips that grazed the cheek hesitated for a moment when they touched the tip of a thin glove but soon parted to nibble lightly on the fabric’s edge.

The moment a small piece of cloth fell to the floor, the flickering emotions in Yuder’s eyes revealed themselves as dark as pitch but remarkably clear.

With a defiant grin, Kishiar kissed the revealed fingers and the crimson stains that had randomly colored his knuckles. Yuder could vividly feel, through his own skin, lips filled with intense desire and joy tracing a curvaceous line upwards.

In a moment of unintended reflex, Yuder’s hand clenched, and a wave of warmth rushed from the depths of his belly. Yuder hastily pressed his lips back onto the lips of the man holding his hand. Kishiar gladly received the kiss, steadying Yuder to prevent him from falling forward.

Their lips eventually parted amidst heavy breaths, and an alluring, excited voice flowed out.

“Tell me more.”

Anything is good, just more.

As if enchanted by that call, Yuder knelt in front of Kishiar and rested his forehead against the man’s tightly embraced shoulder.

“I don’t know how this connection between Commander and myself came to be. What power it holds, I also don’t know. You said

you can’t remember the dreams… perhaps someday through that, you’ll come to know more.”

“Are you afraid of it?”

Yuder remained silent, forehead still resting on the shoulder, then responded with a barely audible voice.

“If it was before, I would have said no. But now, I am afraid.”

“Shall we find a way to sever it?”

The counter-question momentarily halted Yuder’s breath.

“Would it alleviate your fear a little if I swear never to look for any more information about this bond between us?”

Kishiar would find a way to sever the unseen bond and he swore not to dig any deeper concerning Yuder.

It was an irresistibly sweet offer, yet Yuder couldn’t bring himself to reply.

He knew Kishiar would keep that promise the moment he nodded. But Yuder also knew better than anyone that all his fears wouldn’t simply vanish by agreeing.

The secrets that twisted like thorny fruit peels within Yuder Aile would never disappear as long as he lived. Every time he looked at Kishiar while living this life, they would without fail scream and leap.

Such was the price for being so deeply enamored with the presence before him.

“No.”

Drawing in the unique scent emanating from Kishiar’s sturdy nape, Yuder reiterated.

“It won’t be.”

“That’s difficult.”

Kishiar chuckled as he stroked Yuder’s back. Yuder felt that touch, kept silent for a moment, then spoke.

“Yudrain was my name.”

“I had thought it seemed like some sort of title. Whoever gave it to you chose well.”

“Do you think so?”

Even those well-versed in Gore had to consult their books to understand the complicated grammar involved. Clearly, a lot of effort had gone into this. “The name seems as if it was given more thought than even the one I gave to Nathan. Wouldn’t you say it’s a good name?”

At this point, neither the name Nathan Zuckerman nor Yudrain could be credited solely to him. Instead of answering, Yuder let out a long sigh.

“To be honest, I never fully understood the meaning of that name. But I think the meaning you’ve shared is probably correct.”

“You mean the one who named you didn’t tell you the meaning?”

“He might have, but… I really don’t know.”

He hoped that Kishiar wouldn’t detect the emotion hidden beneath his parched voice.

“Well, it’s better to know than not, I suppose.”

Kishiar didn’t ask who had given Yuder the name or why Yuder didn’t know its meaning. Instead, he gently pressed his lips to

Yuder’s hand and cheek again, as if encouraging him to say more.

“Though you may already suspect, the diary of the first Duke Tain that Enon wished to read was something I wanted to know about first. The moment I heard the section you read yesterday, it felt like it might be connected to questions I had, which is why I discussed it with him.”

“‘If we can find out where the cursed ones come from, perhaps time that doesn’t flow in reverse could also be on our side.’”

Kishiar recited the section he had read before.

“You mean the ambitious research goal of finding out where the monsters come from?”

“That’s part of it, but it’s mainly about the reference to time.”

While Yuder hesitated about how to articulate his thoughts, Kishiar muttered something as he gently stroked the back of Yuder’s head.

“To me, it looked like just one of many historically interesting concepts, but if it means more to my assistant, there must be a reason. If it’s too difficult to say, you don’t have to. Is there anything else I should do besides giving that to Enon tomorrow?”

“…No.”

“That’s a shame.”

As he spoke, Kishiar again brushed his lips past Yuder’s ear, leaving a light kiss. A small laugh escaped Kishiar’s lips as Yuder’s grip tightened on his clothing. The hand stroking Yuder’s hair became softer, more tender.

This sensation prompted a new thought, a new impulse in Yuder.

“Do you think, Commander, that time could ever be on someone’s side?”

“While there are plenty of sayings about time favoring the patient, that’s probably not what the diary meant. Taking it at face value… I don’t think it’s possible. If it were, countless mages would have already bent time to their will.”

His answer was reasonable and within expected parameters.

No one in history had successfully manipulated time with magic. Not even the Archmage Luma. Time was impartial to all, and everything in existence went through rises and falls before dissipating into the wind. No matter how powerful or influential, no one could escape this absolute rule.

Yet, for Yuder, time had indeed flowed backward.

What would Kishiar think when he eventually arrived at that conclusion? What would his expression be, what words would he speak? Though Yuder couldn’t know now, he hoped that he would still be by Kishiar’s side when that time came.

To continue in the same vein as before would not suffice. To ensure that Kishiar’s long patience had not been in vain, Yuder too needed to strive to find tangible proof of the truth, worthy of the faith bestowed upon him.

As Yuder’s thoughts began to diverge from what they had been, becoming something a bit different and more far-reaching, another voice broke his reverie.

“…However, I’m not so sure about the present era.”

Almost involuntarily, he looked up, his eyes meeting Kishiar’s deep red gaze, which softened tenderly.

“Isn’t this the time when the age of mages wanes and the age of the Awakeners rises? Much like a thousand years ago, when it was openly said that the era of priests was fading and the age of mages was dawning.”

This was new information. When Yuder blinked in surprise, Kishiar explained the source.

“It was written in that diary. Just like back then, anything could happen in this era, so think carefully about what I said today.”

“…”

“The responsibility of pondering and judging lies with the listener, not the one who has spoken. I’ll think it through and come up with my own conclusions. Then, it will be your job to tell me whether I’m right or wrong.”

Smiling as if to ask, ‘Is this good enough?’ the man changed the overwhelming sense of impending rupture, which had been a blend of Kishiar’s unique scent and the solidity enveloping him, into different emotions entirely.

Yuder could no longer resist the urge to be closer to the being in front of him. Wrapping his arms around Kishiar’s neck, their lips met again. Just before Yuder could slump off his chair, Kishiar caught him and stood, making further conversation impossible.

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Yuder remembered the moment when he had first kissed Kishiar after returning to the past.

A burning desire that swallowed hesitation and resistance in an instant. Even though he knew that the result of the choice he had willingly made was nothing more than a simple touch of skin that anyone could experience, for Yuder Aile, it was a world-shaking revelation.

What had the sharp sensation of offering something internal, something existing within his flesh, to another without any protective barrier felt like? The momentary satisfaction and thrill of drinking in the other’s essence in return for giving his own? Even now, everything felt as vivid as if it had just happened.

In the invisible entanglement, there was no chaos as he had anticipated. Only his existence and Kishiar’s were distinct in a world he could perceive. He doubted he would ever forget that moment, so enormous and seemingly eternal.

Whenever they repeated the same action afterward, the crimson desire didn’t become more familiar; it only intensified. Right now, it was almost at its peak.

Even as he felt Kishiar lifting him up and moving towards some unknown destination, Yuder remained tightly clutched and focused solely on the kiss. Anything less would not have sufficed to quell the storm-like impulse raging within him. The turbulent emotions were neither skillful nor smooth, but Kishiar fully accepted them, though it did not imply leisure.

As Yuder’s lips and tongue intertwined, his body responded intensely. In equal measure, Kishiar’s breath and gaze were also

shaken. Their eyes, wide open so as not to lose sight of each other, continued to focus on the same spot even as they fell onto the bed.

Yuder felt an invisible energy flowing through his body. Until now, he had occasionally sensed Kishiar's unique scent through the tip of his nose when they were close, but now it revealed itself differently.

Far different from any perfume, the scent unique to a second gender Awakener being deepened like an energy with a will, penetrating Yuder's face, arms and legs that wrapped around Kishiar, and even deeper areas where no clothes covered. It felt like entrusting his entire body to an invisible current.

It wasn't just Kishiar's scent that took on such a form. Yuder could sense that something that had left him was penetrating into Kishiar just as intensely. It was a foreign sensation that he had never felt before in either his past or present life, but its nature felt instinctual.

This was the scent that Yuder had carried ever since his second gender manifestation. Because one normally could not perceive one's own scent, this was the first time he had truly become aware of its existence.

People without second gender could only know it through smell, so they often mistook it for a unique body odor. But the scent he actually felt was somewhat different. In certain situations, it intensified to reveal its presence clearly, perceivable not just through the sense of smell.

"Do you feel it?" Kishiar momentarily pulled away from Yuder's lips and deeply inhaled along Yuder's neck.

"It feels like you're captivating me and pulling me to the ends of the earth."

It was a remarkably accurate description. After all, the scent of Kishiar that had penetrated into Yuder's body was evoking the same sensation.

In a way, it was similar to the sensation he had felt when he drank alcohol laced with the blood of a monster. Yet, what existed now was far hotter and more intense than what he remembered from back then. The fact that they could feel this way just from mere contact struck him as astonishing.

"I feel the same," Yuder replied.

Upon hearing the soft-spoken reply, Kishiar grinned with delight. Yuder slid his hands into his golden locks, enveloping him as if holding onto the man who had just kissed his neck. The feeling of his soft and silky hair wrapping around his fingers alone ignited a heat within him, somewhere deep in his belly.

'More.'

He wanted to touch more.

He wanted to entwine further, to share even more.

As Kishiar's hungry touch traced the tips of Yuder's pale ears, the usually hidden nape of his neck, and his broad shoulders, he also moved his lips to the vulnerable area below Yuder's ear, to the collarbone, and to the moist lips. Despite the absence of force, Yuder found himself gasping for breath, his waist involuntarily twitching.

"Ah…ah."

As if wanting to be even closer, Yuder embraced him tightly and suddenly felt the distinct, heavy warmth of another being near his legs.

'Ah…'

A moment of clarity allowed Yuder to recall a time not long after they had arrived in Tainu. They had entangled in a similar way on a sofa that was now damaged and replaced. Through that experience, Yuder understood just how much Kishiar was restraining himself physically.

The brief promise that Yuder had made—that once he fully recovered from his injuries and regained his strength, he would no longer be able to hold them back—had finally come to fruition right before them.

Looking at the shadow between Kishiar's legs, which felt hotter and more imposing than in his memory, Yuder felt not fear or reluctance but a sense of eager welcome for a long-awaited presence.

Kishiar, in turn, had forgotten none of the small conversations and promises he had shared with Yuder. The feeling of this affirmation was overwhelmingly certain.

A deep thrill surged up swiftly, resonating within their throat.

"…You kept your promise."

Catching his breath, Kishiar lifted his face, slightly furrowing his brows as he smiled.

"I said I would, didn't I?"

"…"

"Actually, I was thinking of holding back until we returned to the capital… but the moment I touched you, I couldn't think of anything else."

Anything else. In a low voice, almost breaking, he whispered repeatedly and met their lips once again. As if the eye of the most

violent storm is actually the calmest place, so too were Kishiar's eyes.

Yuder tugged on the fabric hanging precariously on the man's shoulders, a piece of clothing that was close to ripping. Their bodies entwined deeply without further words. The buttons on Yuder's shirt popped off somewhere, Kishiar's soft cloth around his neck was not only removed but ripped, yet they had no care for such trivialities.

As their lips continuously met, their bare skin was exposed faster than in any of their previous encounters. Yuder tilted his head as he felt the heat Kishiar firmly held in one hand below.

"Mm…"

For the second time, they were directly aligned. Every time the calloused palm, toughened by daily sword practice, massaged their respective organs, waves of pleasure so intense it felt like his brain would combust flickered through his mind.

Yet, what captivated Yuder's gaze more than anything else, then and now, was Kishiar's face.

A face completely entranced by Yuder, unable to think of anything else.

Under the bright light, the fervor of a man feeling the same pleasure and reacting to the same sensations was more vivid than anything else.

"Ah… Ah, hm. Ah."

Every point of contact between them trembled with ravenous desire and fierce joy. In the midst of a yearning to be even closer, a poignant and agonizing warmth surged up from within.

Yuder overlaid his own hand atop Kishiar's. As their hands—backs and fingers intertwined—caressed their exposed flesh, Kishiar grimaced and clenched his teeth. Even his face, stripped of its smile, was breathtakingly beautiful.

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Despite the familiarity of it all, every action felt refreshingly new.

Even though Yuder had intertwined bodies with Kishiar countless times, he had never willingly extended his hand like this before. It was also the first time he freely let out his voice without worrying about someone overhearing.

Nothing was shameful, and he wanted to miss nothing.

Yuder's face, lost in deep satisfaction and concentration, turned almost expressionless as if devoid of emotion. If it weren't for his heated breath escaping between slightly parted lips, and the darker-than-usual flush tinting his eyes, no one would have known the extent of his passion.

But Kishiar, in a state no different from his own, was able to fully read the intense emotions Yuder was experiencing. The look in Yuder's eyes, as he moved without inhibition like shedding a layer of self-control, seemed like a flame burning within ice.

How captivating, yet poignant, awe-inspiring, and intoxicating the raw and pure desire revealed by this typically secretive and quiet person could be—Yuder probably didn't even realize it himself.

Instinct and reason flickered dangerously close, crossing paths incessantly. For that moment, neither could think of anything else.

"Eh, ah, ha…"

Finally, the climax arrived, turning his mind hazy.

Yuder, trembling with a pleasure akin to a tidal wave, clashed lips with Kishiar once again. The small sensations of their lips not

aligning perfectly, of bumping and sliding, brought a sense of euphoria.

How many seconds could they have endured such overwhelming sensations? Only then did a semblance of rational thought begin to return.

“…Haah.”

The first thing he felt was the warm liquid that had wetted both hands. Most of it had pooled in Kishiar’s palms, but some had splattered onto their bodies and the hem of their clothes.

Lying beneath Kishiar who covered him entirely, Yuder felt as if he was trapped in the world’s smallest, most solid, and comforting cave. Glancing down at his exposed stomach and the liquid trickling down, he raised his eyes to scan Kishiar’s body.

If Yuder’s attire was disheveled, Kishiar’s was ripped and torn to an even greater degree. It would have looked less messy if he had taken everything off.

The reddish marks faintly visible between his shoulders and collarbone caught Yuder’s eyes. They were handprints, left in haste as Yuder had grasped him. Those small areas of flushed skin, damp from sweat and heat, looked surprisingly obscene.

The same went for his face, revealed through the disheveled golden hair.

Leaning in to gently rest his forehead against Yuder’s, Kishiar softly bit and sucked on Yuder’s lower lip before letting go. The kisses that followed—on the lips, the jaw, the neck, and even the wet hand that he elegantly pulled towards himself—felt like hot brands.

The stigmas that had marked Yuder in his past life had never shaken him, but the brands Kishiar offered, filled with fervent and

scorching heat, were different. Without uttering a word, they profoundly shook Yuder's core. At every touch, his skin trembled and his heightened senses focused solely on that spot. Still intoxicated by the lingering pleasure, Yuder looked at him. And Kishiar looked right back.

His lips, flushed as though they were about to burst from countless kisses, were impossible to look away from.

"…"

Like himself, Kishiar also couldn't extinguish the internal flames boiling within him with just one evolution. The locked gazes, the scent that thickened enough to fog his mind, and the persistent heat below, despite having been relieved once, left no doubt in Yuder's mind.

He didn't know how far Kishiar was willing to go, but he had a rough idea of what the next step would be.

Could they proceed further? Upon contemplating, the answer effortlessly flowed in.

If possible, he wanted to go ahead.

Though it was not a mating season, and even though he didn't yet know if Kishiar wanted to go further, a remarkably firm resolve reared its head.

Any fear related to the act was gone. All he desired was to reach Kishiar La Orr more deeply, and more completely.

He wanted to reciprocate all that the man before him had given.

He wanted to see more faces of Kishiar that he didn't know…

"Commander…"

In order to convey this conclusion, the very moment Yuder reached his hand toward Kishiar's chest, something happened.

Before he could even complete the gesture, the thick scent around them suddenly reacted strangely. Just as Yuder's scent explosively intensified, light burst out from the point where his hand made contact.

'What…?'

Opening his eyes, he saw the light wasn't coming from Kishiar, but from his own hand. The faintly glowing red light spread up his arm, vivid enough to shine through the skin. Yuder noticed various colored energies emanating from beyond Kishiar's chest where his hand had touched.

It was something he had seen before.

Startled, he pulled back his hand, and the light that had enveloped it began to fade. The energies visible beyond Kishiar's chest also disappeared.

Kishiar, too, looked at the scene with widened eyes and softly whispered,

"What was that just now?"

Yuder looked down at his hand, still faintly wrapped in the red light. The shock caused his arousal to subside, and he finally remembered what they were supposed to be doing tonight.

Getting lost in someone to the point of forgetting even what they were originally supposed to do was a first in his life, no matter how exceptional the circumstances had been since yesterday.

Sitting up silently, Yuder turned his head toward Kishiar. In the man's eyes, he could see a look that suggested he had some idea

what was going on.

“It seems like I’ve managed to unlock the power flowing within you, Commander.”

Should he feel relieved that he succeeded even in this situation? His mind thought so, but his feelings were somewhat complicated. It was an unfamiliar sentiment.

Kishiar also sat up and gave a small smile.

“That’s good to hear. Do you feel any pain or anything unusual?”

Yuder shook his head. Taking a deep breath, Kishiar spoke.

“Getting greedy beyond this point may be difficult. Let’s clean up first, and then we can try that again properly. Is that okay?”

“Yes.”

Standing up from the floor, the man seemed to have an idea and extended his hand toward Yuder.

“Although it’s a bit regrettable, shall we bathe together? We’ve never shared a bathroom while staying here, after all.”

A playful arch of the eyebrows and a smile adorned his face, a lingering warmth still palpable. Although an unexpected incident had occurred, he wasn’t disappointed in the least. The moment Yuder sensed this, he was finally able to quell his astonishment.

“Yes.”

Kishiar grinned brightly. Led by his hand, Yuder entered the bathroom with him for the first time.

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The bathroom they had been using was a lavish space, almost mistaken for an art-filled lounge if not for the large, white tub in the center and the mirror that hung before it.

The round floor was covered in smooth, water-resistant white stone tiles, bordered with gold-accented tiles that formed intricate patterns. Beside the bathtub stood a large ceramic basin, its edges finely etched with delicate designs, placed atop a lavishly crafted wooden stand.

Scattered throughout the room were valuable gemstone pieces and paintings that, at a casual glance, seemed merely decorative. In reality, they were magic tools, allowing one to easily turn the water on and off or ventilate the space.

As soon as Kishiar stepped into the bathroom, he began undressing himself without waiting for an invitation. There was a time when he had deliberately avoided looking at that body, but now, Yuder found it hard to look away from the man’s exposed form.

Even when clothed, Kishiar’s physique didn’t seem scrawny, but the revealed flesh was truly remarkable. His muscles were tightly coiled from years of rigorous training, and his long, solid limbs were a sight to behold. The balance between his bones and skin seemed like a meticulously crafted sculpture. Even the genitalia that Yuder had just touched moments ago seemed perfect.

This was the first time Yuder had looked so candidly at someone’s naked body without feeling either awkward or repulsed. However, it was likely that anyone who saw that body would feel awe or admiration rather than shame.

After undressing, Kishiar turned his head to look at Yuder, who was still in the midst of disrobing. Although he must have sensed Yuder's gaze upon him, Kishiar calmly smiled and gestured to Yuder's half-removed shirt.

"Need help undressing?"

His voice was both blatantly seductive and teasingly soft.

"…No," Yuder shook his head and quickly shed his nearly buttonless shirt. While Yuder finished taking off the rest of his clothes, Kishiar leisurely watched, pressing a statue to fill the tub with water.

"You know," Yuder had just removed his last piece of underwear and straightened his back when he heard Kishiar's voice behind him. "My assistant has a beautiful back. Straight posture, slender waist. It was attractive enough in uniform, but even more so without."

"…Really?"

Caught off guard, Yuder turned his head, only for Kishiar to move closer. Beyond the sound of warm water pouring and the steam filling the air, Kishiar's natural scent permeated.

"And your legs are also beautiful, especially when you run or leap. They seem like they were born to run," Kishiar continued, his eyes scanning Yuder's thighs and calves before returning to his face. "Didn't you grow a bit taller since you first joined the Cavalry?"

"…Yes, you're correct. How did you know?"

Yuder had continued growing even beyond his age in his previous life, and this life was no different, albeit he had grown a bit faster, possibly due to better nutrition. It was such a minuscule difference, he was surprised Kishiar had noticed.

“How could I not?”

‘Because I’m always watching you,’ Kishiar replied, smiling.

The bathtub was large enough to accommodate two men taller than average. Skillfully, Kishiar opened a container by the tub’s edge, sprinkling in high-end bath soap shaped like flower petals. As they dissolved, the petals transformed into a translucent golden froth, enveloping the two submerged bodies.

In his previous life, Yuder knew that nobles often used special soaps, but he had never understood the point of using such extravagant items. Thus, he had hardly ever tried them out. Even now, knowing that he was in a bathroom, he had focused solely on quickly washing up and leaving, opting for the ordinary soap always placed near the sink.

However, as he reclined amidst the golden bubbles and looked at Kishiar through dampened lashes, Yuder finally seemed to understand the allure of such luxuries.

Yuder’s gaze shifted toward his reflection in the mirror beyond the bathtub. He noticed something he hadn’t when undressing: multiple discolored spots on his neck and collarbone area. All were places Kishiar had been lingering with his lips.

“I’m sorry. You’ll likely have some marks left,” Kishiar said, as if knowing exactly where Yuder’s attention had drifted. Yuder blinked a few times before shaking his head.

“It’s fine.”

Though a bit surprised, he wasn’t upset. He lightly touched the marked areas, feeling a tingling and slightly stinging sensation on his skin. As he reflexively pulled his hand away to touch the spots again, Kishiar reached out to stop him.

“…It’s already quite stimulating just by looking; let’s leave it at that.”

His voice had dropped lower, tinged with a languid quality. Startled, Yuder withdrew his hand. Kishiar grinned.

“You’ve never used this soap before, have you? Is it to your liking?”

“Yes.”

“Good to hear.”

“Have you always been using it?” Yuder inquired.

“No. It’s usually too much of a hassle,” Kishiar said, lowering his head as his lips curled into a secretive smile. “But this is a special occasion. I was curious to see what it would be like to watch you enveloped in these bubbles.”

“And how do you feel?”

“I have to acknowledge the dedication of whoever created this just for a beautiful bath; it’s quite satisfying.”

At that moment, when Yuder looked into Kishiar’s face turned toward him, his heart skipped a beat. He exhaled deeply, gazing at the man who seemed to admire him like a work of art. His voice came out soft and distant.

“I think… I find it nice too.”

“Hmm?”

“Your body is much more beautiful and pleasing to look at than mine.”

“…”

Kishiar seemed not to have expected a compliment in return, and his eyes widened for a moment before he burst into unreserved laughter.

“Thank you for that.”

‘…Did I truly become a beast?’

Although his inner self argued that this reaction was normal, Yuder couldn’t help but doubt whether he was too easily affected by Kishiar, once more.

Regardless of his internal debate, Kishiar relished the bath. He playfully scooped up bubbles to lather on Yuder’s face, and then gave him a peck on the tip of his nose.

As Yuder tried to ward off the man’s nonsensical offer to shampoo his hair, their bodies accidentally touched. Frozen for a moment at the sensation of their skin meeting amidst the silky foam, Kishiar pulled him into a deep kiss. The strong feeling that surged through him when long fingers caressed his foam-covered face was intense enough to send shivers down his spine.

When Yuder regained his senses, he found himself reciprocating the kiss, his body now straddling Kishiar in the water.

Eventually, he grew comfortable enough with the gentle, playful touches that caressed his bare skin, and it was only after sullying the water once more that their fervor subsided.

After changing his clothes, Yuder sat waiting for Kishiar to emerge, reflecting on the conversation they had earlier.

The reason Kishiar could spend the whole day without giving any indication to Yuder, quietly waiting for him to speak first, was that he now had ample free time compared to his previous life. Because he

sincerely valued the opportunity that time afforded, he was able to extend his hand in anticipation of what would come next.

Some might call this waiting and patience a waste of time, but Yuder couldn't agree. The moments that Kishiar had let pass had greater significance to him than any words or actions, and had paved the way for outcomes like the present one.

Today, Yuder had told Kishiar several clues to the truth, including his own name. Given what had been revealed so far, Kishiar might be able to come very close to the actual truth.

However, that wasn't the whole truth.

Yuder himself still didn't know why or how he was able to travel back to the past. Telling fragments of a truth that even he wasn't fully aware of would only result in reliance on the other's faith, without yielding any concrete results.

Kishiar had said that providing the answer and having Yuder confirm it would be enough, but Yuder thought that wouldn't suffice. How could he confirm something when he himself didn't know the whole truth? Such an act would not serve as an adequate answer for Kishiar.

To prove that the enormous patience shown by Kishiar was justified, and to stay by his side in the future, Yuder needed something more than just relying on the other's faith. The missing pieces of the entire truth, which were currently not in Yuder's possession, were precisely that requirement.

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Chapter 450

‘Until now, my priority was saving Kishiar and preventing the calamities I remembered from my previous life, rather than finding out why I returned or how to recover my lost memories. But from now on, both will be of equal priority.’

Yuder recalled the image of Kishiar in the last dream he had. Even the certainty of his death was now shrouded in uncertainty; he couldn’t keep fearing the unknown.

His eyes gleamed with a newfound determination.

“Well, shall we begin anew?”

Kishiar emerged in a robe, laid down on the bed with a cheerful expression, and Yuder sat in a chair next to him, looking down at his exposed chest and stomach.

The warmth still lingering from a recent bath, the scent of the same soap they used wafted from his damp, golden hair—just looking at him was enough to unsettle Yuder’s mind.

“How should I position myself? Is this okay?”

Observing the man with his hands clasped on his upper chest, showing no signs of tension, Yuder frowned. Though graceful, the posture felt rather awkward.

‘It looks like a pose one takes in a coffin.’

It was not a good pose to adopt, especially in front of someone who had seen him lying in a coffin in exactly that position.

“Just lie down as you usually would when sleeping. There’s no need to change your posture.”

“Alright.”

Kishiar obediently lowered his hands.

Yuder took a deep breath, feeling Kishiar’s gaze on him. After several deep breaths to calm his racing heart, he placed his hand on the lower part of Kishiar’s abdomen and felt the warmth of a living being. It strangely touched a deep part of his soul.

The dark red mark on the back of Yuder’s right hand remained unresponsive.

“Based on previous experiences, the power of the red stone within me seems to manifest not when I want something vaguely, but when I desire it with clear intent.”

“So, was it the same earlier?”

“At that time…”

Though his thoughts had been somewhat hazy, he distinctly remembered what he had wished for. He had wanted to know Kishiar deeper, more completely. The sensation of their bodies meeting had been overtaken by that overwhelming desire, and red light had flowed from his hand.

When he had previously looked into Kishiar, he had initially wanted to gauge the extent of the Awakener’s power within him. Though not exactly the same, the core desire—to know more about Kishiar—was similar.

If that had been the key to invoking the power of the red stone within him, then it should work this time as well.

“…Yes, well, it’s somewhat different, but it seems the power within me responds in a similar fashion.”

“Is that so…”

Kishiar’s expression changed, teetering on the edge of a smile. Yuder closed his eyes, focusing on the hand he had placed on Kishiar’s body. As before, he decided to begin by attempting to see the Awakener’s power within him.

“If it hurts, let me know.”

Kishiar responded not to worry, but Yuder remained cautious.

Carefully exhaling, he focused on a single thought: wanting to look deep into the power within Kishiar. How long had he focused, concentrating every nerve on the sensations in his right hand?

The dark red mark on the back of his hand slowly began to swell and pulse.

Yuder’s eyes snapped open, and in that instant, a light flared as if timed to his movement.

It was a success.

Of course, it wasn’t as quick and effortless as when he had briefly glimpsed Kishiar’s inner workings earlier. The moment the light emanated from Yuder’s hand, a considerable resistance arose within Kishiar, attempting to push the light away.

Yuder immediately seized his momentarily faltering right hand with his left, pressing it down. The expression on the face of the reclining Kishiar also changed.

‘Still, compared to the first time I saw inside Kishiar… the resistance is much weaker.’

As he strained to maintain control, the skin within the area touched by the red light gradually began to turn oddly transparent. One of Yuder's eyes took on a golden hue as a breeze stirred, but he was so intensely focused that he didn't notice.

Moments later, the taut resistance finally began to wane. Alongside this, various colorful energies slowly emerged within Kishiar as if they had been waiting for this moment.

Bright, clear divine power, an aura that moved like blue wind, golden magic energy that branched out like a tree, and finally, the red energy of an Awakener that enveloped them all.

The four types of energy seemed almost sentient as they moved, each following its own path.

'The condition doesn't seem to have changed much from before. Some tangled parts remain… has the amount of magic energy decreased a bit?'

Yuder's gaze moved toward the point where the entangled energies were flowing and converging. Near that final destination, the life point, there existed a massive bundle of energy, pulsing strongly, as if a second heart.

Wrapped in transparent red energy, it was an indescribable something that exuded an overwhelming power just by being looked upon. That, right there, was Kishiar's 'Vessel.'

Even after all this time, the sight still filled Yuder with an intense sense of power. Unlike before, he felt considerably better this time. The eyes that used to hurt just from seeing this direct manifestation of energy were less painful, and he felt less drained.

And because he wasn't in pain, he could naturally scrutinize it more clearly and in greater detail. Yuder waited until he felt that all the energies were fully revealed before cautiously speaking.

“…Can you see it?”

“Yes. Astonishing.”

As before, the power revealed by Yuder’s touch was visible to Kishiar. Whether it was only visible to him, or to third parties as well, remained uncertain, but it was still a significant discovery.

The man who had been scrutinizing his own inner workings for the first time looked up to meet Yuder’s gaze.

“Is there any discomfort or pain?”

“I’m fine. However…”

Kishiar, who had been staring intently at his assistant without even blinking, maintaining a sharp tension behind his emotionless eyes, quietly asked,

“Did your eye turn golden again?”

Caught off guard by the unexpected question, Yuder blinked.

“Pardon?”

“The light is very strong. Looking up at it, it’s like a star in the night sky.”

Yuder turned his head to look into a small mirror beside the bed. The sight of one eye shining in the dim room was rather eerie. No matter how he looked at it, it was no star.

‘Wasn’t like this when it flashed briefly earlier… is it because I’m actively using the power of the red stone now?’

Enon’s description of that eye as a “window to wisdom” or something of that sort came to mind. He felt that it had become

easier to exert his power here; perhaps that eye had something to do with it.

Yuder quickly averted his gaze from the mirror and changed the topic.

“The red energy among these four types is the energy of the Awakener. That was the only power I could interact with before. And the largest mass enveloped by that power is probably… what I think is your vessel, Commander.”

“I suspected as much, but it’s not particularly pleasant to see. I suppose I should be grateful to have at least one ugly part.”

Kishiar chuckled, making a joke. Yuder did not smile, not even a little.

“Before, when I touched one of the tangled areas, it was absorbed into me… This time, I won’t recklessly touch it.”

“Good. Proving that it can be controlled by will is what’s important for now. Let’s stop here and withdraw your power.”

Yuder nodded and closed his eyes again. A dull pain ran through the back of his hand as his energy waned. The light that had brightened the inside of his eyes also disappeared.

“Are you alright?”

Kishiar immediately grabbed Yuder’s hand and helped him sit up. Despite lying down, beads of sweat were forming on his forehead.

“…I’m fine.”

Only after assessing Yuder’s complexion did the man let go of his hand. Yuder looked down at his own hand before speaking.

“The power seems to be following my will much better than before. With this, I think I can safely inspect His Majesty’s body very soon.”

There was no more reason for Kishiar to object, now that it was proven it could be done. The man, lost in thought and looking down at his body, slowly nodded.

“Let’s discuss this in more detail after we get to the capital.”

Afterward, Kishiar and Yuder exchanged a few words about the flow and position of the energy existing within his body. Most of it was asking whether the state of the power had been the same when they had seen it before, but even that was enough to gather ample information.

“It’s quite interesting that the Awakener’s power envelops the vessel. I haven’t been able to see the inside of Levlin Shand Apeto, so I can’t be certain, but perhaps his insides are similar to mine.”

Revlin, the third son of the Apeto Duchy, was inherently frail due to a hereditary disease, but became healthy upon awakening, which made him similar to Kishiar.

“This is just my speculation, but I believe the power of the Awakener may share intrinsic properties with all other types of power,” Yuder added.

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“It’s essentially similar in nature to other powers,” Kishiar continued, observing the look in Yuder’s eyes.

“Meaning, it doesn’t provoke a strong reaction when mixed with other powers. Instead, it may even protect the vessel that holds it. It’s like dough before it takes shape—a power that can envelop anything and change it as it pleases.”

“I get what you’re saying.”

There were no fixed rules governing the power of the Awakeners. Though categories had been arbitrarily established for convenience, not a single power was the same as another, a fact evident from looking at the Cavalry members alone. Even among those with similar abilities, the nuances were all different. Thus, it was difficult for anyone to claim a comprehensive understanding of the Awakeners.

That was also the case for the power Yuder had absorbed through his hand. That power was simply ‘power’ in the purest sense. What exactly it could accomplish and how far it could go remained an enigma.

“If you grasp that point, it may be quite helpful when assessing His Majesty’s vessel,” Kishiar mused.

A power like dough that could become anything.

Though the pure form of that power was indescribable, even described as pure poison by Enon, calling it ‘dough’ oddly made it feel whimsical and gentle.

“Yes, I understand,” Yuder said, nodding with a relaxed expression.

“Before we proceed with His Majesty, let’s try a few more times like today. It might be tough, but are you okay with that?”

“Of course, I am. I was going to ask you for it myself.”

Kishiar gave a faint smile. Taking a deep breath, he reached out and patted the seat next to him—a signal to lie down.

Yuder silently got up and lay down on the right side of the space where Kishiar had been sitting. As soon as he did, Kishiar turned his body so that his face was visible to Yuder. In the dim light cast by the lantern, he whispered,

“Everything will be over after I meet the Star of Nagran left here tomorrow. How do you feel about returning to the capital?”

“It still doesn’t feel real to me.”

“Things will change once you go back. For better or worse.”

Yuder wasn’t sure why he felt so strange thinking about walking back into the barracks. Despite concluding everything in a much shorter time and with significantly fewer casualties than in his past life, the sensation was inexplicably peculiar.

Yuder’s gaze shifted toward Kishiar’s face.

‘Once we go back, staying in the same room like this won’t happen.’

Baron Willhem had been captured, so technically there was no need to continue the pretense of being lovers. Yet neither had suggested separate bedrooms. Though their comrades thought this

was just due to sharing space within the same lodging, Yuder knew that wasn't the case.

Originally, it would have been unfathomable to casually lie next to a man who should be as distant as the sky. Yet he had adapted to this situation so quickly that he could hardly believe he had slept alone all his life.

'Ah, I see.'

As he sketched the outline of Kishiar's eyes that met his own, Yuder suddenly understood.

The weird feeling arose precisely because he had become so accustomed to it.

It was strange that someone he had once considered impossible to grow accustomed to had now become closer and more familiar to him than anyone else. Different from family yet in some ways closer, it was an indescribable feeling.

"Commander, how do you feel?" Yuder quietly asked, lost in thought.

"Are you talking about me?" A man who always enjoyed when Yuder asked him questions chuckled softly.

"I think we're fortunate that everything went better than anticipated, even if there were points for improvement and regrets."

"…"

"If I had to grade myself, I'd give a 5 out of 10."

"Couldn't you rate yourself a bit higher?"

In the eyes of others, the Cavalry had achieved a result beyond the score of 10, verging on 20 or even 30. Yuder wasn't completely

without regrets, but he was greatly satisfied that there were far fewer casualties than he had seen and experienced in his past life.

At the center of it all was Kishiar, who had managed everything better than anyone else. He certainly deserved more than half of the points he had given himself.

“My assistant seems to have generously rated me. Excessive, even.”

“It’s not generous; it’s merely the truth. What the Cavalry achieved this time goes beyond merely completing a mission. It could have…”

Hesitating for a moment on whether to continue, Yuder decided to speak his mind.

“…potentially averted greater chaos and tragedy that could have spread to the West and the entire Empire. All of this was possible because you were there, Commander. That’s what I believe.”

Kishiar opened his eyes a bit wider and chuckled. “That sounds almost like a prophecy.”

“…”

“The Prince of Nelarn, who considered himself your new close friend, said something similar before leaving. As if you knew he would awaken, you gave him some rather insightful advice.”

At the unexpected mention of Prince Ejain of Nelarn, Yuder momentarily furrowed his brow but quickly smoothed his expression.

“He said that, but he also mentioned that you have no prophetic abilities, so it’s likely not the truth. I had thought then that maybe my assistant’s particularly keen sensitivity to power would allow him to sense someone on the verge of awakening.”

“That’s not the correct answer.”

“I see, so this isn’t it either,” Kishiar responded, slightly disappointed. Yuder paused before speaking.

“But assuming he would soon awaken is, in fact, correct.”

“Even without a prophecy?”

“Yes.”

“So should I take that you said it considering the real possibility that it could have happened?”

Instead of replying, Yuder simply nodded. Kishiar’s gaze deepened.

“You don’t hold such certainty in everything. Therefore, the difference between what you are certain of and what you’re not might be the key to the truth.”

A tingling sensation lightly radiated from within his chest.

However, Yuder quickly suppressed the sensation and said nothing.

After what seemed a long period of silence, the man finally spoke. “Thank you.”

For saying that.

A brief, tender kiss landed on Yuder’s forehead, then pulled away. Staring blankly at Kishiar’s unusually youthful smile, Yuder furrowed his brows. His throat tingled inside his tightly sealed lips.

…

Finally, the day to return to the capital after wrapping up all matters had arrived.

The Cavalry stood in formation, dressed in their black uniforms, just as they had upon their arrival. The people of Tainu, regardless of their social status, gathered to witness their departure.

“The atmosphere is completely different from when we first arrived,” Ever mused, her face awash with a complex mix of emotions. “Back then, no one paid any attention to us, and if they did, it was only to show hostility.”

“While there are still those who are hostile, it’s amazing how the overall atmosphere has changed,” he continued.

While Ever, Emun, and the remaining members were finishing preparations for departure, Baron Koelt rushed over and dismounted from his carriage. Though his face showed signs of fatigue from already beginning to deal with matters related to Tainu on behalf of Baron Willhem, his expression was noticeably brighter and more fulfilled.

As Baron Koelt surveyed the area, bewildered by the sea of black uniforms, his eyes finally settled on Yuder. He approached cheerfully and greeted him.

“Sir Aile, it’s unfortunate we must part ways. Do you happen to know where His Grace the Duke is?”

“He stepped inside for a moment, but he’ll be out shortly. Please wait a bit,” Yuder responded.

True to his word, Kishiar soon emerged with Nathan by his side. The sight of him in his white uniform temporarily stunned many around them, creating an awkward silence where there had been noise. The Cavalry members, now accustomed to Kishiar’s

appearance, chuckled quietly at those who seemed to lose their souls upon seeing their Commander's face.

"Ah, Baron Koelt has arrived."

"Your Grace," Baron Koelt greeted, bowing his knee.

Rather than bestowing gifts or flattery upon Kishiar, Baron Koelt quickly discussed several matters, one of which was about the old mage laboratory on the fourth floor of the Security Management Team's underground dungeon.

"I'm sorry I can't return the diary we took immediately. It turns out to be more interesting than expected, so I'll examine it further and send it back to you later. Is that alright?"

"If you need to, please feel free to examine it as much as you want. I don't have the time to study it properly at the moment either. It will be a few months before I can start any meaningful research," Baron Koelt responded.

Yuder's gaze subtly shifted toward Enon, who was standing not far away with Hellem. Mick had decided to return due to some upper-level matters, but Hellem had ultimately decided to accompany the Cavalry to the capital. Hidden within the cloth-covered box that Hellem was carrying was the still-living Pethuamet, or rather, Penpen. Inside the bag that Enon was carrying was the diary of the First Duke Tain.

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Kishiar had given the diary to Enon as promised, but he hadn't forgotten that his original plan to examine it with his assistant had been unexpectedly thwarted. Thanks to that, Yuder received the translated version of the diary the very next day after their deep conversation.

Yes, it was a translation written in Kishiar La Orr's own handwriting.

Yuder wondered when he had found the time to write it all. Kishiar explained that he had diligently read and transcribed it in the few hours while Yuder was meeting with Enon.

"When reading difficult texts, it helps to take notes as you go along. This is just a first draft, so don't read too much into it," he said with a casual smile, the image of which still lingered in Yuder's mind.

Although Yuder didn't have the time to read the translation immediately, he stashed it in his bag, planning to review it as soon as he could.

While Kishiar and Baron Koelt were wrapping up their conversation, the Cavalry had almost finished loading most of their baggage onto the wagons. All that remained were the farewells with the guests who had come to see them off.

Yuder once again exchanged greetings with Micalin Punt, the leader of the Western Mage Union, who had arrived a bit later than Baron Koelt. Micalin mentioned that he would be stopping by the Pearl Tower for research and would later attend trials related to the West in the capital. He hinted that he'd like to visit the Cavalry headquarters, if possible.

“Of course, I’ll have to see Thais Yulman’s face there as well… but that’s a small price to pay. Tsk.”

Micalin might meet Hellem when he arrived, but he didn’t recognize another robed mage who was deeply hooded and hiding her face. It seemed that Hellem had no desire to personally greet him.

“By the way, I heard that the western branch of the Cavalry is to be established here, is that true?”

“Yes, and we’d appreciate any support from the Western Mage Union.”

“That’s a given. The Cavalry has been a valuable research sponsor and an ally in many regards. With Baron Koelt, we’ll have a much smoother relationship than with Willhem,” Micalin assured, laughing heartily. Although he hadn’t attended Willhem’s party, he had swiftly stepped in to assist the Cavalry in the chaotic aftermath.

He’d reached out to noble contacts to suppress malicious rumors and subtly aided Baron Koelt as well. As a result, Yuder’s impression of him had improved.

‘He probably stepped in more eagerly to prevent Baron Willhem from returning… but he did act appropriately, and that helped us sort things out quickly.’

The resentment against Baron Willhem among the mages was profound. The Western Mage Union planned to testify about the various misdeeds he had committed against them over the years during his trial.

After expressing his lengthy wish that Willhem would receive a punishment that would prevent his return to Tainu, Micalin’s face lit up as he turned toward Kishiar. Many had seen their fates change

due to recent events, but Micalin Punt seemed to be one who had changed in the most favorable way.

Next to say their goodbyes to Yuder were Robel and Marty. Though their eyes looked tired, as if they'd spent many nights in deep thought, Marty appeared noticeably more cheerful.

"After talking it over with Robel, we've decided to accept the offer you made, your Grace," Marty said.

Listening to Marty's soft whisper, Robel wore a look that was both pained and in love.

"Adapting to the abilities is one thing, but I thought it would be better to stay for the sake of the villagers who haven't regained their memories yet. Especially after hearing that Emun, who helped us so much along with Priest Lusan, has taken charge of the western branch, I felt it would be disgraceful to leave just like this."

"You needn't feel indebted," came the reply.

Yuder looked at the two anxious faces awaiting his answer, let out a soft sigh, and then smiled.

"Everyone will be delighted to hear the news, Emun included. I am, of course, no exception. If anything happens, please contact us through the western branch."

Emun had been a frequent aide to Priest Lusan, along with Finn. No one knew better than Marty how tirelessly Emun had taken care of those who had lost their memories. Marty was filled with immense gratitude and a sense of indebtedness toward him.

Although the presence of these two might seem inconsequential now, Yuder thought they would be a key to shaping the atmosphere of the western branch according to Kishiar's wishes. Robel, who was a local and well-informed about the Star of Nagran, and Marty, who

had an uncanny knack for situational judgment, would likely prove more useful than they even realized.

“Thank you, sincerely,” they said.

Seeing Yuder’s smile, the two wore perplexed expressions for a moment before suddenly breaking into relieved smiles and departing.

Not far away, the few who had regained their memories surrounded Lusan, shedding tears of gratefulness.

“Priest, please come again someday! Next time, we want to greet you in a better state.”

“We will never forget this kindness, even in death.”

“What have I done… Oh my, when did you all make these? How many times have I told you to rest…”

Receiving their handmade hats, gloves, and small carved gifts, Lusan blushed and appeared equally at a loss. Despite their multiple farewells, they couldn’t bring themselves to let go, so steeped were they in gratefulness.

Elsewhere, Ever, holding a small cat, was happily chatting with Kanna. Yuder watched with a faint smile as he observed the comfortable demeanor of Nipollen Van Tain he hadn’t seen in a while. Despite being separated from Pruelle, the well-behaved cat had spent most of its time quietly in Ever’s room.

Kanna, who joined them late, was initially shocked to discover the cat’s identity but quickly adapted and treated Nipollen very well. Nipollen also seemed to find Kanna very comfortable, as far as Yuder had heard.

The kitten, who appeared to have no concern for what had become of the father it had nearly forgotten, yawned widely. Its tiny but quite sharp canines flashed briefly before disappearing.

“Oh my God, what do I do? Even its yawn is too cute to handle!”

While Kanna shivered at the excessive cuteness, the cat suddenly pricked up its whiskers and ears, reacting to something. At the end of its gaze stood a young man with red hair wearing an awkward smile.

It was none other than Pruelle Van Tain who had entrusted Nipollen here, his elder brother.

As promised, he rushed here as soon as the process of approving the successor within the Tain Duchy had reached a conclusion. To those unaware of the situation, it seemed pointless for him to come only to see the Cavalry leave for the capital soon after. However, he had a duty to ensure his younger sibling’s safety, so it was a non-issue for him.

However, with Kanna, whom he had just greeted, and the still unfamiliar Ever, he found it oddly difficult to approach them when they were together.

“Uh, hem-hem. Haa. Phew.”

Yuder turned his head away again, watching Pruelle take several deep breaths with a resolute expression before approaching the ladies courteously.

While helping to maintain law and order, other members of the Cavalry had built friendships with the residents of the west. They greeted various people here and there, shaking hands or bumping shoulders. There were some who watched from a distance, clearly dissatisfied, but they dared not voice their criticisms openly.

Amid the sighs of regret, there were glimpses of hope and laughter for the future—a sight he had never seen in his past life. Yuder slowly moved towards a black carriage in the middle of the procession that was laden with baggage.

Surprisingly, the unremarkable-looking carriage had no baggage inside. In its empty space lay a lone member of the Star of Nagran, Hosanna, who would accompany the Cavalry to the capital.

‘He still hasn’t woken up…’

Though his external wounds had healed and his internal injuries were nearly recovered, Hosanna had not awoken by the day of departure.

If it was the first time he had overused his abilities, it might be understandable. But if days passed and he still did not wake, Yuder wondered if another method would have to be employed to rouse him.

Yuder carefully closed the carriage door to avoid drawing attention and sat down. He hadn’t had much opportunity to observe Hosanna closely before, but the young man appeared so frail and thin that one might believe him to be a teenager. Yuder recalled the words Lusan had used to describe him.

‘He never seemed to be a healthy person to begin with. His inability to properly use one leg likely worsened his condition. However, as a Teleporter, he shouldn’t have had a problem with mobility…’

As Lusan had noted, one of Hosanna’s legs bore a terrible scar. Lusan had said the wound was neither congenital nor old, but had been attempted to be treated many times. However, the failure to heal was attributed to his poor health and challenging circumstances.

‘It’s unfortunate, but it’s too late; the leg has already hardened like this. If I keep pouring divine energy into it, it might improve somewhat… but fully restoring it will be difficult.’

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Chapter 453

The vigilance towards Hosanna had naturally slackened a bit, as he remained unconscious for an extended period. Normally, there would've been a guard physically tied to his wrist, but today a long tether connected his wrist to a post outside the tent.

Yuder let out a soft breath, lightly placed his hand on Hosanna's body, and closed his eyes. Within his closed eyes, a golden light flickered as an invisible energy swirled.

Measuring the power of ordinary Awakeners had always been somewhat feasible, and it was much easier than it had been during Kishiar's time. There was no need to exert effort in delving into the body's interior to sense the energy. Yuder quickly grasped the power that existed within Hosanna simply through his senses.

'As expected, he's still far from fully recovered.'

If this condition persisted, even waking up might not enable him to employ his previous level of abilities. There had been instances among the Awakeners who suffered severe injuries from exerting their powers. Like Ershi, a member of the captured Star of Nagran, for instance.

Ershi had been subdued by Ever before her power went berserk, fortunately sparing her life. However, upon waking up, her strength had deteriorated substantially compared to before. Unlike Hosanna, she had regained consciousness relatively quickly but refused treatment and even caused injuries to some of the members. Kanna had even narrowly avoided being fatally stabbed in the neck during the investigation.

Ershi didn't believe in the capture of Baron Willhem or that the secret auction had failed. She had disregarded news of Nahan's

escape and the stories of surviving human trafficking victims, simply screaming that everyone was in cahoots while attempting to attack.

Ershi had only become subdued after encountering Ever again.

Originally cautious to avoid overstimulating Ershi, Ever had taken immediate action with a menacing look after Kanna's near miss. Whatever method Ever used remained unknown, but afterward, Ershi became significantly quieter. Only then could Kanna properly read her.

After meeting the newly awakened Marty, he had heard that Ershi had become even more subdued. The last time she met Kishiar, she was even sociable enough to dine alone.

'Is it finally time for death?'

Ershi, who had managed to step back from a madness that could have incinerated everything around her including herself, appeared far more composed than before. She seemed to naturally assume that she would be summarily executed, but Kishiar shook his head.

'No.'

'Why?'

'Let me ask you instead. Why should you die? Can you list a justifiable reason for your execution here?'

At his words, a fire lit up in Ershi's eyes. Only then did he realize that the fire he thought was extinguished was still alive.

'Should I list the names of those I've killed? Hypocrites who don't even know why I did it! What did you all do a year ago when countless people begged for help in the same place? I killed those who deserved to die! If you don't kill me here, you'll be next! I'll tear that smug face to shreds and stuff it into your guts!'

The moment Yuder frowned at the fierce outcry, Kishiar raised his hand to stop him. Even when met with unspeakable curses and insults, not a single ripple crossed Kishiar's smiling face.

Instead of responding that there had been no Cavalry a year ago, he threw an entirely different counter-question.

'Then let me ask you this. Did you think that the servants of Graham Willhem also deserved to die? What about the ordinary people of Tainu who were merely doing their jobs, or the soldiers who were just patrolling? Do you even know who they were, what kind of people they were?'

Names flowed effortlessly from Kishiar's mouth. He had memorized the names of all those who had been hurt or killed in the events stirred up by the Star of Nagran.

As each ordinary name slipped out, the expressions of the surrounding members couldn't hide their surprise, and Ershi's face twisted more and more.

'So what are you trying to say? Just kill me here and now!'

'No, you won't die here,' Kishiar declared quietly.

'Even if you die, it won't change what has already happened. Just like how revenge didn't solve the real reason you did what you did.'

'…'

'So, I'll give you one more chance.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I will give you the opportunity to see clearly what you resent, who you should be seeking revenge against, and what consequences your actions have wrought. We'll revisit this conversation afterward.'

Ershi, and the few members who had followed Kishiar, said nothing. Yuder felt the same.

‘What exactly are you thinking?’

‘As soon as you and your comrades recover, you’ll be doing various tasks here. If you don’t want to, you could go to prison, but you’ll have to atone in some way regardless. And after Tainu fully recovers and the trials conclude, I’d like to hear what you really wanted, what you hoped for from the Cavalry.’

Ershi’s eyes oscillated between suspicion and caution. Kishiar was about to turn away from her when something seemed to occur to him.

‘Ah, and I won’t forget the objective compliment you gave my face during this conversation. It was unexpectedly memorable.’

‘…’

Ershi’s eyes changed meaning, this time wondering if this man who seemed so frivolous could really be an imperial family member and a duke, and if she’d been fooled this whole time.

Yuder, recalling Kishiar’s laughter that had bewildered everyone, sighed and shook his head.

Even Yuder had thought for a moment that it was absurd, but he didn’t think the words were meaningless.

Kishiar had never fully exercised his authority to manage and punish the Awakeners within the Cavalry. So this declaration signaled to all the members how he would steer the Cavalry going forward.

Some might call his approach lazy and lenient, but Yuder didn’t see it that way. Knights had their rules, mages had theirs.

And Kishiar La Orr would write new rules for the Awakeners, in a direction previously uncharted.

“Yuder! There you are! We’re about to set off!”

Just as he was about to leave after checking on Hosanna, Kanna burst through the door, her face flushed.

“I’ll be in charge of this person right after departure, so don’t worry and go back to your post.”

“Understood.”

If Kanna was taking care of Hosanna, there was nothing to worry about. Nodding, Yuder descended as Kanna climbed into the carriage in a switch. Their hands brushed for a moment as Kanna touched the carriage door. She flinched slightly, her shoulders trembling ever so slightly. Her quick, blinking eyes scanned Yuder’s covered face and neck, and the tips of her fingers touching the carriage door, but Yuder remained unaware.

“Then, I’ll be going now.”

“Ah, wait. Yuder. By any chance, what did you do at the lodging yesterday?”

The voice that asked was unusually soft and cautious. Clearly, some kind of emotional shift had been detected. Yuder hesitated briefly before replying succinctly.

“I had a conversation with the Commander.”

“Ah, yes. Of course, since you share the lodging with the Commander.”

Kanna, who had been stating the obvious, suddenly mumbled even more softly than before, her lips tightening.

“So, um… has that problem you were worried about been resolved now?”

“Yes, thanks to that.”

“I see. That’s a relief… truly, a relief.”

Her following words started to slow down, and ultimately, the tips of her ears turned a reddish hue. Her demeanor was notably peculiar compared to usual.

“Is there something you want to say?”

Gazing at Yuder’s expressionless face, Kanna firmly closed her lips that had been parted in anticipation.

“No, no! Maybe it’s because there are so many people here, but I keep picking up weird information. I’m feeling a bit disoriented. Even earlier, I almost—”

Yuder cut off her overly excited chatter.

“Be careful. If you’re tired, I can just stay here.”

“No need for that!”

Kanna, who had firmly shaken her head, retracted her hands after pushing Yuder’s shoulder slightly.

“Go ahead. I’ll see you later.”

“…Alright.”

As Yuder left, he decided he would suggest to Kishiar that they should pay more attention to Kanna’s surroundings.

‘Reading information against one’s will must be draining. She’s been enduring it well so far, and maybe I took that for granted.’

At that moment, he didn’t know that Kanna’s peculiar behavior would continue even after they returned to the capital.

…

Nahan jolted awake.

He blankly stared at the dark ceiling before rolling his undamaged eye to the side. The sound of a creaking wagon and a musty smell filled the air.

“Finally awake, are you?”

The voice beside him, devoid of any emotion, slowly pushed back the hat that had been covering his face. The individual had striking red skin, unmistakably a Southerner.

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Chapter 454

“I planned to leave you for dead, but you miraculously started improving since yesterday. Lucky you.”

“…”

“But regardless of that, I’d like you not to use your abilities. From what I’ve seen as we escaped through the gate, I already know well enough how dangerous your power is. If you disagree, you’ll be dealt with right here.”

Nahan slowly but firmly nodded his head. His cold ash-gray eyes surveyed the inside of the rattling carriage in a meticulous manner. Besides him and the Southerner who had removed his hat, there was one more person in the dilapidated wagon filled with an unpleasant smell. Dressed in a thick robe, this third individual had an old, suspicious-looking sheath and a long sword beside him. His hand rested on the hilt, ready to draw at any moment. The intention was clear: any false move and Nahan would be killed.

“Do you remember why you’re here?”

At the Southerner’s question, Nahan cracked open his parched lips.

“…I encountered you. Underground.”

“Good. It seems your head wasn’t damaged, fortunately.”

“Is there any water?”

“We’ve been riding non-stop for days, so we didn’t have much time to resupply. All we have is this; can you drink it?”

Nahan looked at the filthy canteen the man offered, and then reluctantly opened his mouth. Since his shoulders and upper body were bound with cloth instead of bandages, he couldn't lift it himself.

Although the amount of water was woefully inadequate to quench his thirst, it did clear his mind and vision a little. Nahan took a deep breath and asked,

"Where are we going now?"

"We are currently moving along the Yohum trade route. If all goes as planned, we should arrive in Charlotte shortly."

Charlotte, the largest maritime trade city in the southern part of the Orr Empire. A few more details sporadically flashed across Nahan's dry mind before fading away.

"Thank you for keeping your promise, brother."

"Brother, huh? It was ridiculous the first time I heard it, and it's still ridiculous now."

The Southerner muttered with an utterly serious expression. As he gazed down at Nahan with inscrutable eyes, he opened his mouth once more.

"Because of you and the Cavalry, our plans have been thrown off track. Nevertheless, we brought you along because we wanted to escape from the same place. To be honest, killing you wouldn't be satisfying, but we've honored our promise because we owe you."

"…"

"But I've been curious why people with powers like yours so vehemently opposed the Orr Empire and the Emperor's Cavalry. What is the reason? Is this a shared goal among all of you? What are the identities of your group?"

Instead of responding, Nahan just looked at the man's face. As the man seemed to be contemplating using his power and furrowed his brow, he stepped back, allowing Nahan to speak.

"What changes if you know?"

"Depending on your answer, the assistance that we can offer each other may increase."

"Although I understand that you brothers are not merely the Tain Duke's puppets, it's difficult to answer without knowing anything."

"Are you saying you can't answer even with your life on the line?"

The Southerner's expression sharpened. Nahan didn't react, just locked eyes with him. Just when an ethereal energy seemed to emanate from the Southerner's body, the third man, who had been silently watching with his sword at the ready, finally spoke up.

"Such threats won't work on him, Onakwei. Stand down."

"But Lord Aton—"

"That man isn't the one who disrupted our plans. If we want genuine cooperation from our opponents, we too must offer something worthy. Don't forget what's important now."

The man called Onakwei ultimately retreated in silence. Only after confirming this did Aton lower his sword and remove his hat. Below the rich brown hair that could be mistaken for black, piercing indigo eyes were revealed.

In contrast to Onakwei, who seemed unremarkable and easily forgettable, Aton was a handsome man with fine and aristocratic features.

“Right now, the capital is buzzing with talks about the trials related to the Tain Duchy. Many believe the current Tain Duke will soon step down, and his trading business in the west is about to collapse. At the center of it all is the Cavalry. What do you think this means?”

“I don’t care what happens among the high and mighty.”

“Then what do you care about?”

“The freedom of my brothers and sisters. A world cleansed of unnecessary elements.”

His voice was coarse but carried a peculiar madness, like crackling fire. Onakwei scrunched his nose, seemingly unable to understand the nonsense before him. However, Aton studied him intensely without blinking before finally speaking.

“I see. So for you, the unnecessary elements are those who are not Awakeners and those currently in power.”

“…”

“Very well. Let’s consider this conversation never happened. Keep your promise not to use your abilities against us until you arrive in the south.”

Aton put his hat back on. Curious if the conversation was truly over, Onakwei glanced between the two. The other man, Nahan, had closed his eyes as if his strength was drained.

After some time had passed and Nahan was confirmed to have fainted again, Onakwei spoke softly in the southern tongue.

“Lord Aton, why did you do that?”

“Did you see his eyes?”

“Yes? I mean, I did, but—”

“He’s someone words won’t get through to, and additionally, he’s dangerous. What he desires may align with ours, but they are incompatible. It’s better to leave him be. No need to stir the pot.”

“And then?”

“Follow him after he reaches the south. He must have other companions. Even if he won’t talk, others will.”

With conviction in his voice, Aton looked down at Nahan’s face as he concluded his last words.

“Simply discovering that there’s an organization at the very bottom of the Empire, composed solely of those with power, is gain enough. The Great Chieftain will be pleased.”

At the mention of the Great Chieftain, Onakwei’s eyes shifted.

“…Understood.”

“Don’t forget. Follow him the moment he arrives. He’s extremely dangerous, so pick those with matching abilities. It’s best if Swin and you handle it personally.”

“I will do so. But I must admit, I am a bit curious as to how someone with such abilities wound up in a place like the Empire with injuries like this.”

To Onakwei’s question, laden with curiosity towards his own people, Aton responded indifferently.

“Considering his very light skin tone, he’s probably of mixed blood. You know well enough how those of mixed blood are treated, don’t you? They are unwelcome everywhere.”

“Fair enough.”

“Even with his face in that condition, he doesn’t bother to hide it at all. He’s already far removed from ordinary humans. Even if he’s in a state of being mentally unstable, don’t let your guard down.”

“Yes.”

In the chilly atmosphere, Onakwei bowed his head. Just then, the carriage they were in jolted, causing the sack between them to sway.

Simultaneously, Onakwei sniffed an overpowering, foul smell that was impossible to ignore. Irritated, he muttered under his breath.

“Ugh… Whatever is wrong with that powder? It’s increasingly emitting this strange odor. It’s not wet, and I’m transporting it with utmost care… Could something have mixed with it during its journey from its origin?”

“…”

Although Aton didn’t respond, he clenched his lips, seemingly sharing the same sentiment. Even Nahan, who had woken up from a coma with severe injuries, had detected that the overpowering stench was neither from an aging carriage nor from horse dung.

All the odors were emanating from the Calanesa powder that the southern merchants had painstakingly transported.

“Surely it hasn’t rotted. There’s no way to know if this is the original smell, and there’s no one to ask. It’s a dilemma.”

“Ask the coachman to open the window and see if we can speed up a bit.”

“Yes…”

If it hadn’t been for those damned Cavalry members, there would have been no need to transport this in such dire circumstances.

Everything was supposed to go smoothly, just by successfully distributing it under the patronage of a foolish Duke Tain. Cursing in various southern expletives, Onakwei opened the coachman's window while Aton quietly turned his head. Their hardships would continue for a while longer.

…

At the southern end of the Orr Empire lay vast deserts. Taking tens of days to cross, these deserts were more often remembered by their nickname, 'The Tomb of Stars,' rather than their original name.

Unless someone had a life-or-death reason to go to the south, no one ventured there willingly, not even tax collectors who usually frequented barren lands.

Few were aware that near these lands, a village existed where Awakeners from all over the country were hiding.

"New information has arrived from the west. It appears that everyone who had been staying there has likely been captured by the Cavalry," the informant reported.

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Chapter 455

The people gathered around the long table, carved from wood, stirred at the words.

“What on Earth has happened?”

“So, everyone who’s been captured is going to die? Like the Gayle and Doyle brothers?”

“What happens to us then? Do we have to leave this place?”

“It’s all clearly because of Nahan.”

As a woman with thorns covering her arms loudly mentioned Nahan’s name, all eyes instantly turned to her. Anyone else would have kept their mouth shut, overwhelmed by the tense atmosphere, but she confidently stated her opinion.

“How long has it been since he stirred up trouble in the capital, and now he’s stayed in the West to help Ershi? If I had found him with a Cavalry, I would have captured him immediately. This was all foreseeable!”

“…”

Breaking the brief silence was a young man seated diagonally across from her.

“You’re speaking nonsense. Have you forgotten that Nahan went there to help relocate the Western base?”

The man’s words dripped with sarcasm, causing a timid-looking man seated next to him to shrink his shoulders, looking as though he

regretted his choice of seat. However, the woman with thorns on her arms didn't back down and chuckled, holding her head high.

"If he went to help with the relocation, he should have come back as soon as the situation was resolved. I've heard that he plotted dangerous schemes there with others and ousted any colleague who opposed his opinions. And I'm not the only one who's heard it."

"Ousted? What I heard was completely different. Those brothers left that place on their own accord…!"

"Enough!"

Just as their bickering escalated into a full-fledged quarrel, a bespectacled man seated next to the head of the table pounded the surface, silencing both of them.

"Why are you so impatient when the Sage hasn't even spoken yet?"

Then, all eyes turned to one person seated at the very end of the table. The middle-aged man, who until now had maintained his silence with a kind expression, finally spoke with a sheepish smile.

"No, it's fine. Say whatever you want to say. Isn't that why we gathered?"

His voice exuded sincerity. Hearing this, the people who were at each other's throats just moments ago quickly calmed down, muttering apologies. The bespectacled man then asked the Sage.

"Sage, what should we do now?"

It was the question everyone had wanted to ask. The 'Sage,' receiving their desperate gaze, pushed up his worn glasses that had slipped down his nose and spoke.

“Well… the only news we’ve received so far is one uncertain piece of information that they ‘might have been captured,’ isn’t it? But considering brother Hosanna is there, do you think our brothers and sisters would be so easily caught?”

“That is true, but…”

“All we know is that Nahan tried to help sister Ershi there. We don’t know anything for sure. His actions likely came from a heart nobler than any, a true reflection of his character.”

“…”

His was truly a soothing voice. As they listened to his cautious opinions, everyone in the room felt their anxieties gradually subside, even those who had been criticizing Nahan.

“To be honest, I’m the one who sent Nahan there. I should be the one to apologize to everyone.”

“There’s no need for such words, Sage.”

Outcries erupted sporadically from all around. The sage waited until their voices had faded before opening his mouth again.

“…Therefore, we will wait a little longer for news from my brother Nahan. We have another brother stationed in the west; let’s hope for more concrete information from that end.”

“What should we do if everyone, including Nahan, is captured?”

Would they really have to move their base once again? Looking at the eyes of the crowd, filled with fear and anxiety, the sage quietly smiled. His warm grin was so soothing that those who saw it found themselves involuntarily exhaling a sigh of relief.

“Even if that were the case, we will not leave this place. We have already made preparations of our own, given our past experiences.”

“Preparations?”

“For a few months now, we’ve had the fortune of being aided by some individuals. Thanks to their help, Nahan and his men were able to rescue many from the House of Apeto.”

At the mention of the Apeto House, many exchanged surprised glances. They all knew that Nahan had ventured into the main residence of the Apeto House to rescue several Awakeners, but they hadn’t known the backstory.

“A while back, through that connection, we were approached by someone quite special, who resides right at the heart of the capital. He is young, deeply troubled, and struggling—yet he has reached out to us for help.”

The heart of the capital could only mean the imperial palace. Who among those in the palace was young and mysterious enough to seek aid?

There could only be one. The Crown Prince, destined to be the next sun, Katchian La Orr.

Those quick to connect the dots swallowed hard.

“Could it be…”

“I’ve considered it for a long time. But I’ve decided to accept this request.”

A far greater wave of excitement spread throughout the room, even more so than when they first heard that Nahan and his comrades in the west might be captured. While most were daunted

by the current situation, some revealed a strong interest in the tale of a powerful figure in need of their abilities.

The sage looked at each of their faces, lost in their own thoughts, and concluded.

“It’s not just about protecting all of us. If my abilities can help someone, anyone, I would gladly offer them. That’s all there is to it. And if any of you wish to contribute to such a cause, feel free to approach me at any time.”

The room fell silent. No one else spoke, and the meeting came to an end. As many left the meeting room with faces relaxed in relief, one man who had been timidly quiet the entire time paused.

As he looked back pensively at the meeting room he had just left, a passing Awakener spoke.

“Whoa, Daemon, you are relentless! Planning to go back to the sage again? Why, to volunteer once more?”

“Um, no, I—”

“I hate to say this, but maybe it’s time to give up. It’s impressive that you can copy others’ abilities, but they manifest far weaker than the originals. What’s the point of continuing this? Even when you copied Gayle and Doyle’s abilities, in the end, their roles were taken by Mei. Isn’t it okay to just live an ordinary life now? When they need your abilities, they’ll surely call.”

Daemon’s face flushed. The Awakener patted his shoulder and walked away with a benign smile.

…

The return journey of the Cavalry proceeded as quickly as advancing flames.

Of course, the actual speed wasn't much different, but the mood made it seem so. With all tasks successfully completed, there was no burden on their minds, and the lack of burden made their steps infinitely lighter. Despite walking and running all day, the members felt no fatigue and laughed.

A few days after their departure, those who had started from the Great Sarain Forest joined the group. Greeting their colleagues whose skin had paled from lack of sunlight due to running through dense forests, the members of the Cavalry happily exchanged greetings.

Yuder also had a hectic reunion surrounded by Gakane, Jimmy, and other members responsible for the Great Sarain Forest.

"Yuder, you've fully recovered! I'm so happy to lock eyes with you again. I'm really relieved."

"Hey, Yuder! Can we have a duel tonight? Everyone says I've improved my abilities a lot. You'll be surprised if you see it!"

Though still bandaged from his injuries, Gakane's face was much brighter than before, and Jimmy, who had grown taller, eagerly talked on both sides, making it impossible for Yuder to concentrate.

Standing beside them, the Eldore siblings, reunited after a long time, held hands with relatively calm expressions.

"Let's test our abilities against each other as soon as we get back, Finn."

"I'll do better."

"What are you talking about? I'll do better."

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Chapter 456

The members eagerly placed bets as they watched two identically appearing individuals compete against each other for the first time since joining the ranks. The buoyant atmosphere persisted even after Kishiar made his appearance.

“It’s good to see everyone in good health.”

“We’re delighted to see you as well, Commander. Your eyesight seems to have improved remarkably.”

A member of the Cavalry, known for his cheeky demeanor, raised his voice and saluted Kishiar. The others joined in, cheering and offering their own salutations. It was hard to believe that these were the same people who had been terrified at the sight of Kishiar during their induction ceremony.

They could do these things because they knew Kishiar was the kind of man who would take such jokes with a smile.

And then Kishiar, just as everyone had hoped, boosted the troops’ morale with a smile more radiant than ever.

“Thank you, Joyce. However, it’s too early to celebrate. A wonderful vacation and delicious meals await us when we return. Let’s all give it a little more effort until the very end.”

“Really? Thank you!”

Amid a sky-high round of applause and laughter, Yuder quietly observed Kishiar’s face.

No one there could even suspect that Kishiar would soon be meeting a dying Emperor upon his return. Who could imagine what

lay behind that smooth smile?

He was so adept at concealing all his emotions and smiling. For his Cavalry, which was rejoicing, and for his one and only brother, he would keep his feelings in check for as long as needed.

That was the kind of man Kishiar was.

There was a time when Yuder thought he knew nothing about him, and also a time when he felt that he knew him better than anyone else.

But now, in a different sense, Yuder felt as though he had come to understand something he didn't know about Kishiar.

A complex and somewhat bitter emotion filled him, making it hard to say he was pleased. Yuder lowered his eyes.

…

"Your Majesty, Duke Peletta has sent word. He plans to arrive in the capital as scheduled."

The Emperor, lying down, rose at the steward's low and formal voice. A rare expression of sincerity appeared over his pallid face.

"Good… He has arrived promptly. Is everything prepared for my departure?"

"Yes."

"And the Empress?"

"She has already arrived just outside the Sun Palace."

"I can't keep her waiting too long."

The Emperor nodded and stood up on his own. Although his movements lacked strength, he did not wobble, thanks to his slow pace.

The elderly steward silently assisted the Emperor with his clothing and preparations. It was far different from the light and simple attire the Emperor usually wore. Today, the Emperor was dressed in full formal robes, befitting the ruler of the Empire.

He wrapped a piece of blue cloth from his shoulder to his waist and threaded a cord of twisted gold through his cloak. Age-old jewels inherited through a millennium adorned him from head to toe. Finally, he put on white gloves embroidered with luminescent threads and donned the golden crown, the symbol of the Orr Empire.

The Emperor, now fully prepared, chuckled softly as he looked at his ample robe.

“I’ve lost so much weight… The robe is still too large. Or have I lost even more weight in the meantime?”

The steward bowed his head deeply in a gesture of regret.

“It’s not your fault. Don’t bow your head like that.”

Standing before a mirror that reflected his entire figure, the Emperor felt as if he were crushed under the weight of his clothes. No amount of makeup could conceal his pallid complexion or cracked lips; his emaciated frame was beyond help. In fact, the golden crown and long cloak were only making him feel more suffocated and burdened.

He wanted to shed them at once, but he couldn’t.

Turning his back to the mirror, the Emperor walked towards a door he had not used in a long time. As the steward led the way and knocked on the door, knights standing outside pulled the handle.

The moment the doors to the Second Palace opened for the first time in what seemed like ages, many felt a swirl of mixed emotions. The Emperor proceeded outside, passing knights who knelt in reverence. Numerous people, waiting in front of two twin-like carriages, bowed their heads in unison as a mark of respect. Simultaneously, the door of the carriage on the right swung open, and the Empress leapt out.

“Your Majesty.”

Upon seeing the Emperor after such a long time, the eyes of the Empress reddened slightly. Biting her red lips, she struggled to find words for a moment before finally suppressing her sorrow and breaking into a smile.

“I am truly pleased to be with you on a day like this. Please, enter the carriage.”

The Emperor stood next to the Empress in front of their respective carriages. Long ago, they always rode in a single carriage, but now they never did. The reason was something neither wished to speak of.

Before climbing into the carriage, the Emperor quietly opened his mouth, his back to the Empress.

“I feel the same.”

“…”

The Empress hesitated for a moment. The Emperor entered the carriage without meeting her gaze.

“The Emperor departs!”

A knight announced in a deep and majestic voice, pulling the reins vigorously. The grand procession began to move.

As the parade passed the boundary separating Zone 1 and Zone 2, the guards holding the line swallowed nervously and knelt. Beyond the border stood a woman dressed in a long blue robe typical of a mage, and following her were other mages.

“All from the Imperial Mage Office greet Your Majesties,” she courteously greeted, falling into step at the head of the parade. As they moved from Zone 2 to Zone 3, generals and soldiers with graying hair bowed their heads respectfully.

“Imperial General Gerald Mucker is here at Your Majesties’ summons.”

The crowd surrounding the carriages grew larger. All who saw the advancing procession couldn’t hide their astonished expressions as they knelt.

As they neared Zone 7, the parade lengthened, and the streetscape became increasingly intricate and opulent. Trees towering over the main roads were adorned with a myriad of colorful flowers that fluttered in the wind, filling the air with their sweet fragrance.

Finally, when they reached the boundary between Zone 6 and Zone 7, the carriages halted once more.

Standing there were Imperial Knights dressed in gold-adorned armor and uniforms, along with Theorado Van Tain and a handful of Cavalry members who had stayed behind in the capital dressed in black uniforms, including Steiber Rendley.

“Imperial Knight Commander Theorado Van Tain greets Your Majesties.”

“Calvary Deputy Commander Steiber Rendley greets Your Majesties.”

As the two stepped forward to greet them, the assembled crowd erupted into cheers.

“My God! The Emperor really has come!”

“The Emperor, here—!”

Some Imperial Knights frowned at the outburst but ultimately joined the front of the procession without a word.

The Emperor’s procession finally came to a halt at a massive square near the South Gate, at the end of the 7th District. Everything was perfectly set up there, according to plan, to welcome someone.

Though reluctant, the Emperor could not resist his curiosity about the interior landscape of his carriage. He glanced at the many nobles in attendance, their eyes filled with a mix of apprehension and curiosity, and offered them a cold, icy smile.

However, his expression softened astonishingly when he saw the members of the Cavalry, dressed in black, begin to enter through the gate.

“Well, shall we go meet Kishiar now?”

…

“What on Earth is going on? What’s with these flowers? Can someone please explain to me?”

“Do I look like I know?”

“Actually, weren’t there other knight brigades supposed to have accomplished great deeds and returned today as well? That’s the only thing I can think of!”

“I’m so scared right now that I want to go to the bathroom!”

Yuder faintly heard the mutterings of the Cavalry members, their voices a blend of bewilderment and fear, over the deafening cheers and internally agreed with them.

‘I really have no idea what’s going on.’

Until they arrived in the capital, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. No anomalies or significant changes were felt. The issue arose when they dismounted at the gate that screened entrants outside the South Gate of the capital. Yuder assumed they would be let right in as soon as their identity as Cavalry was known, but for some reason, approval took an unusually long time. Even more baffling were the massive crowds and tremendous cheers that began to rise as they approached the South Gate, not to mention the petals scattered all the way out beyond the gate.

If there were a welcome ceremony, Kishiar would have informed them in advance. However, Kishiar had not said anything about this situation. When Yuder’s questioning eyes met his, Kishiar made a face as if he, too, was not completely without suspicions, and suggested that they simply go in and see.

And so, they found themselves in this situation.

The endless cheers had dulled their ears. Flowers showered over their carriage, almost covering the entire road.

‘… Is this really a cheer for us?’

Yuder watched the spectacle and felt it was incredibly awkward and distant. If he had experienced something similar in his past life, perhaps he would understand, but even then, the Cavalry had never received such a reception for accomplishing any mission.

Even though they were treated with no shortage of respect, most of them were commoners who lived in the Emperor’s shadow. They

were not people who needed such an extravagant welcoming ceremony.

But what was this?

“… I think I’m getting the hang of it now.”

It was then that Kishiar spoke. He was looking through the window of the carriage at something far off, smiling.

“It appears His Majesty wanted to give us a surprise gift, even keeping it a secret from me.”

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Chapter 457

Kishiar’s gaze landed on a square fully prepared for an elaborate welcome ceremony. Yuder’s eyes widened at the sight of a raised platform towering above the neatly seated dignitaries and the two people sitting there.

For several years now, in events requiring the Emperor’s presence, the Empress had typically represented him alongside Crown Prince Katchian. However, Katchian was nowhere to be seen on the highest platform of today’s square. Instead, occupying the seat was none other than Emperor Keilusa, the person who rightfully should be at the highest position in the empire.

Clad in opulent ceremonial robes identical to the Empress’s, the Emperor looked significantly thinner than when last seen. However, he didn’t appear to be someone on the brink of death.

‘…I thought he’d surely be in the imperial palace, considering he was said to have collapsed.’

Yuder wasn’t the only one surprised; the Cavalry members, nobles, and everyone else couldn’t take their eyes off the Emperor. Despite sensing the weight of those countless gazes, the Emperor quietly stared ahead, as if he were alone.

In a lowered voice, Yuder asked while alternately glancing at the two brothers,

“Is it alright for His Majesty the Emperor to make an appearance like this?”

“Of course not. If they had told me they’d arrange such an event, I would have somehow opposed it and interfered. They caught me off guard.”

Although his tone sounded light, as if finding the situation absurd, his eyes didn't convey the same levity. Yuder couldn't even begin to guess the complex emotions Kishiar must be experiencing.

Having spent ten years as a Cavalry Commander, Yuder thought he was fairly adept at dealing with people. Yet, now he was at a loss for words. Noticing Yuder's unusual silence, Kishiar blinked several times before cracking a smooth smile.

"Are you worried about me right now?"

"…"

"It's fine. What's done is done. This event is a rare opportunity His Majesty has provided for the Cavalry. Our job now is to not waste it."

"…Yes."

"If His Majesty knew me, I also know his temperament. If there were even the slightest possibility he could collapse here, he wouldn't have made such a bold choice, given the circumstances. That's the kind of man he is."

'If you say so, then it must be so,' Yuder responded with a small nod.

"Understood. However, I will remain vigilant and keep an eye on our surroundings just in case."

"It feels like I've gained the most reliable barrier in the world. Thank you."

Kishiar burst into a broad smile. His hair was a mess, ruffled as he ran his fingers through his bangs as if trying to contain himself, but Yuder said nothing.

The horse-drawn carriages carrying the Cavalry members reached the square, naturally following the wave of cheers. Stepping down from his carriage, Kishiar looked around and waved his hand, exuding an air of calm as if he had known about this all along. The cheers from the crowd grew exponentially louder at the sight of the dazzlingly handsome Duke of Peletta. Soldiers blocking the street suddenly became more active, thanks to people trying to get closer to Kishiar.

Seeing Kishiar move forward with unshakable confidence, the members also quickly shed their anxiety and followed him with visibly brightened expressions. Without a single word of explanation, everything proceeded as if it had all been perfectly planned from the beginning.

Yuder followed just a step behind Kishiar, quickly scanning his surroundings. Directly below the platform where the Emperor sat, stood the Cavalry members in the capital, including Steiber, whom he hadn't seen in a while. They must have already known about today's welcoming ceremony.

"Even so, not a word reached us. Emperor Keilusa sure prepared this meticulously," Yuder thought.

In the VIP seats filling the square were not only nobles but also mages draped in courtly robes, Imperial Knights, and high-ranking officers within the Imperial Army. Yuder picked out familiar faces among them and paused momentarily when his eyes landed on a particular spot.

'It's been a while since I've seen him, Apeto's First Son, Aishes… I wonder if Revlin is here too.'

Aishes, who had been focusing almost entirely on external activities since the Apeto incident, curbing his father the Duke's influence, attended as the representative of his family today as well.

Though he was only a step away from a dukedom, his complexion seemed much worse than before.

‘Well, he died not long ago in his previous life. It’s understandable, but today’s Aishes looks particularly sharp and gloomy,’ Yuder thought.

Revlin sat at a distance that made it hard to consider him part of Aishes’ family, alongside his lover. He sat closest to the Cavalry’s capital unit, laughing and jesting, a face filled with both pride and envy.

‘It seems he regrets not being able to formally attend today’s ceremony as he’s still a temporary member,’ Yuder pondered. ‘We’ll be accepting new members soon, so he should be able to join us next time.’

While thinking about when would be the best time to share this good news with Revlin, Yuder suddenly turned his head, sensing a hostile aura prickling his skin. Not a significant threat, but when he looked, it was none other than Kiolle da Diarca, sitting beside Duke Diarca, glaring at him ineffectively.

‘Even from such a distance, he managed to find me among the members,’ Yuder thought, noticing Kiolle’s lips moving as if muttering something. It seemed Kiolle was very unhappy that Yuder had returned alive and well. However, given that no oath magic was triggered, it seemed he had improved his harmful language habits somewhat.

Just as Yuder was about to dismiss him as unworthy of further attention, he noticed a new emblem on the chest plate of Kiolle’s armor and narrowed his eyes.

‘Isn’t that… the symbol for the Crown Prince’s escort knights?’

Though distant, he was sure of it. Ever since one of his eyes had opened to the Eye of Magic, Yuder had realized that he occasionally saw things more clearly than before. It was an ability he had discovered unknowingly in Tainu, allowing him to read expressions remarkably well even in the dark, and to see distant landmarks that others could barely confirm.

The emblem on Kiolle's armor was unmistakably that of the Crown Prince's escort knights.

"Did the Diarca family decide to attach Kiolle to Katchian?"

Whether it rained or shined, the person who should be by Katchian's side was here alone. Normally this would be unthinkable, but it probably didn't matter since they likely didn't expect Kiolle to perform his escort duties adequately anyway.

Deciding to investigate this new development further, Yuder completely shifted his focus. Just then, all members of the Cavalry lined up neatly behind Kishiar as the Emperor and Empress rose from their seats.

The Emperor broke his years-long silence, speaking before the crowd of citizens who were gazing at him intently.

"Today, I stand before you to express my gratitude to the heroes who have bravely confronted the threats to our Empire and returned without the help of anyone else."

His voice, amplified through magic, resounded high and far, silencing the crowd. Even under the weight of hundreds, thousands of eyes focused solely on him, the Emperor continued to speak without faltering.

He talked about the enormous crisis caused by the sudden outbreak of monsters in the western regions this year, citing the massive damage suffered by neighboring nations. He also subtly

touched upon the illegal trade that was taking place in the west, tacitly approved by the nobles who were supposed to be protecting the area.

The Emperor’s ability to praise the Cavalry’s deeds while skillfully reprimanding the wrongdoers was undoubtedly in Kishiar’s bloodline.

At first, the citizens were merely intrigued by the fact that the Emperor had spoken. But as they listened, they became increasingly engrossed. The atmosphere improved even more as Kishiar cleverly redirected the Cavalry’s accomplishments towards the Emperor and the Empire. Eventually, cheers and applause filled the square at the end of each of the Emperor’s sentences. Several nobles, including Duke Diarca, wore stone-faced expressions upon seeing the crowd’s reaction.

As the speech neared its end, the air in the square palpably simmered with excitement.

“…And so, I will bestow appropriate rewards to Commander Kishiar La Orr and the 330 members of the Cavalry, along with everyone who assisted in this endeavor. A party has been arranged in the imperial palace to celebrate; do not decline but enjoy. I sincerely thank you for your efforts in saving the West.”

With the conclusion of the Emperor’s words, the square erupted into the loudest cheer yet.

As a bouquet of flowers tossed by someone brushed against his hair and fell to the ground, Yuder momentarily forgot all the serious thoughts he’d been harboring and looked up at the sky.

Bright flower petals floated endlessly under the crystal-clear blue sky.

The spectacle was remarkably similar to the day when he had felt breathless, yet what lay before his eyes was entirely different.

Yuder felt a shiver run down his spine as he looked at Kishiar, who stood confidently before him, smiling with ease.

The Cavalry's first welcome ceremony ended flawlessly, without any issues.

…

Returning to the Cavalry headquarters after a long time, everything remained unchanged.

Still charged with excitement, the members listened as Kishiar briefly announced a week-long vacation and a bonus multiple times their monthly salary, encouraging them to enjoy their time off before heading upstairs.

Half of the members immediately left to drink, while the rest headed to their quarters for some much-needed rest. Yuder was, of course, among the latter. Although many comrades wanted to detain him, his close friends deterred them by mentioning his possible lingering injuries, allowing him to quickly leave.

Carrying his bag and walking toward his room, Yuder remembered a somewhat enigmatic gesture that Kishiar had left him with before heading upstairs.

'…He definitely winked at me, but I can't figure out why.'

It could simply be that he was in a good mood, but the expression seemed to hold a deeper meaning. The problem was that Yuder couldn't guess what it could be.

After setting down his luggage and washing up, Yuder thought he would head to his room.

Standing in front of his room, a sight he hadn't seen for quite some time, Yuder took a deep breath before grasping the doorknob.

Opening the door without giving it much thought, he saw the inside and promptly shut it again.

‘What the…?’

Doubting his eyes, he cautiously opened the door once more. But the view inside remained unchanged. After staring at the bewildering sight for a good while, he finally stepped in and closed the door behind him.

‘What on earth is this…’

Yuder’s small room, which was suitable for a single person to live in, was originally clean enough to be emptied at any moment if he packed up his clothes and belongings. But now, the room he saw was covered in countless flowers, as if the entire square he had just left had been transplanted into it.

No matter how many times he closed and opened his eyes, the view did not change.

Who could have possibly brought so many flowers here, and why? The identity of the culprit was beyond doubt.

Yuder recalled a paper flower Kishiar had left for him during a night in the Great Sarain Forest.

“Celebrating your recovery. The real thing will come later.”

That flower, with those words written on it, was still hidden deep in Yuder’s luggage where no one would find it.

Could this be the “real thing”?

So absurd that it made him laugh, Yuder carefully tried not to step on the flowers that reached up to his ankles, but eventually gave up and tossed his bag onto the flower-covered bed.

The thrown petals stuck to Yuder’s clothes and skin as they landed with a rustling sound. A fragrant and subtle aroma strongly penetrated his nostrils and seeped into his chest.

Closing his eyes momentarily against the almost dizzying fragrance, Yuder found himself already outside his room, running up the stairs to the top floor.

Without bothering to knock, he opened the door that revealed itself in the blink of an eye. The man standing behind the desk near the window of the Commander’s room turned his head, flipping his hair back.

Just as the man started to form a playful smile, opening his mouth to say something, Yuder leapt toward him.

The scent transformed into heat in an instant.

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[Chapter 456.5]

“Yuder is truly amazing!”

Jimmy, who had climbed into a cart covered in dirt, exclaimed with exhilarated enthusiasm.

The boy had finally managed to engage in a brief duel with Yuder Aile. During their evening relaxation time after dinner, the members who had spent the day traveling by cart and horse all gathered to watch the duel.

Jimmy unleashed all the abilities he had developed over time. His strength had indeed increased significantly. However, he ultimately couldn’t so much as nick the hem of Yuder Aile’s clothing. Yuder, who had shown immense strength against the monsters of the Great

Sarain Forest, effortlessly dodged or swung at thin air in front of Jimmy's outreached hand.

After a few rounds of attack and defense, Yuder effortlessly disarmed Jimmy with fluid movements, wielding the weapon far more skillfully than its original owner. In a single stroke, he defeated his opponent and had a blade at his throat, forcing a surrender. Even without using any significant abilities, the skill gap between them was so overwhelming that the onlookers were utterly deflated.

But Jimmy didn't feel bad at all. Every time he lost to Yuder, his eyes sparkled with immense joy. It was only after repeating the same act five times and hearing from Commander Kishiar that it was time to move on that the young boy finally stepped back. Still unable to contain his excitement, he eagerly shared his thoughts with Gakane and the Eldore siblings, who were in the same carriage.

"You see, just because my power has increased a bit doesn't mean I'm suddenly all that. I can see where the tip of his sword is going, so I've been told to practice my basic swordsmanship five more times a day. Starting tomorrow, I'm going to add ten more!"

"Haha, Jimmy. You can roll around like that and not get tired?"

Gakane asked, his eyes a mix of admiration and pride.

"Not at all! Actually, I wanted to ask the Commander if he would spar with me too, but alas, I couldn't."

Finn Eldore shook his head at the audacious comment from the exuberant twelve-year-old.

"A one-on-one duel with the Commander? Ugh, no thanks."

"Me neither."

Hinn Eldore echoed her brother’s sentiment, making the same face.

“Why not?”

“Do you really not know? The Commander never lets anything end easily.”

“Yeah, I’ve never seen him end a duel quickly, even when his opponents are completely exhausted!”

As the twins exchanged nods of silent agreement, Jimmy, who had been tilting his head, cautiously spoke up.

“Um… what about Yuder then? Is it not so great to spar with him?”

“Yuder’s fine. He’s quick to the point.”

“What about you, Gakane?”

“Me? Well… If you’re asking who I’d choose for a one-on-one training session, I think I’d go with Yuder.”

“Huh. I thought Gakane, who is so eager to train, would choose the Commander. Why Yuder?”

Faced with Hinn’s question, Gakane smiled awkwardly and cautiously added his reason.

“Well, Yuder would probably move on to the next person if I passed out, but the Commander… he’d likely keep watching until I woke up again…”

“Ugh, I can imagine it! That face as he watches, smiling!”

“Gakane, don’t tell me you’ve experienced it?”

The noise from the Eldore siblings died down, and Jimmy changed the subject.

“So, who do you think would win in a duel between the Commander and Yuder?”

“Hmm?”

Jimmy scratched his head, gauging the looks from the three.

“Honestly… I’m curious. Am I the only one?”

Comparing someone from humble origins, who joined the Cavalry around the same time as them, to the sky-high, noble Commander was normally unimaginable and quite risky. But they were the Cavalry.

After a moment of silence, Finn, who had been rubbing his chin thoughtfully, finally spoke, looking at his twin sister.

“Uh… this is tough.”

“Seriously. I’ve never faced such a difficult question before. Do you think Uncle Macky felt this way when we pranked him to tell us apart?”

“What pranks have you guys been playing?”

“Not telling.”

Although Gakane asked in a trembling voice, the twins just laughed and didn’t answer.

Afterward, the four engaged in a rather serious debate about ‘The duel between Yuder Aile and Commander: who would be the winner?’ It was an engrossing topic that helped pass the time, given that they had to be stuck in a carriage heading towards the capital all day.

“No, Yuder single-handedly decapitated that massive monster. Using Earth abilities to bind its legs and Wind abilities for offense, it had nowhere to run. Wouldn’t anyone with that much skill be unbeatable?”

“Well, we’ve hardly ever seen the Commander exert full effort. I’ve never seen him struggle against anyone. He’s never been injured like Yuder either. So wouldn’t that make him stronger?”

“But Yuder is—”

“No, if the Commander back then—”

“Ugh! We’re getting nowhere!”

After a fervent debate, Hinn finally raised both hands and shouted, cutting everyone off.

“What’s the point of arguing about something that hasn’t even happened yet? Boring! Let’s make a bet instead!”

“What kind of bet?”

Finn immediately perked up and responded.

“Just bet on who will win! We’ll find out the answer eventually!”

“Sounds fun for a change! But what are we wagering?”

“Money is probably the best, right?”

“True. I heard we’re getting a bonus after the mission wraps up, so we could take a little from there. Sounds good to me!”

“Oh, I want in on this. Count me in.”

“Wait a minute, everyone, calm down! Betting money is essentially gambling.”

“What are you talking about, Gakane? You’re from the South and you think this is gambling? Grow a spine!”

Gakane looked as if he wanted to ask what being from the South had to do with anything, but he was overwhelmed by the group’s enthusiasm and said nothing. Not content with merely drawing Gakane into the bet, Hinn dreamed bigger.

“Wouldn’t it be more fun if more people were involved? I think we should hear other people’s opinions as well.”

“Hinn… aren’t you blowing this out of proportion?”

“Don’t worry, it’s fine. First, let’s ask people what they think about the question Jimmy is curious about. If they show interest, then and only then will I gently ask them if they’d like to participate! Absolutely won’t force anyone who’s not interested!”

“But there might not be anyone like that.”

The twins exchanged glances, smiling devilishly as they clasped hands. Gakane tried a few more times to dissuade them but eventually gave up.

And so, unbeknownst to the Commander and his assistant, an oddly suspicious survey and pool of bettors began to form within the Cavalry.

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Chapter 458

“Did you see the flowers?”

After a long kiss, Kishiar pulled back slightly, their foreheads still touching, and asked the question.

“Yes, I did. They were everywhere; hard to miss.”

“Hahaha.”

Kishiar burst into laughter. Leaning against the window, the man’s eyes sparkled mischievously as he hugged Yuder’s waist. Instead of verbalizing the myriad emotions he had felt while avoiding stepping on the flowers to get to the room, Yuder responded by gripping the hem of his clothes tightly.

“To be honest, I thought you’d be more likely to find them after a few drinks with others. Didn’t expect you to rush over so quickly.”

“Perhaps I wouldn’t have if you hadn’t signaled me with your eyes earlier.”

“Well, calling it a ‘signal’ makes it sound awfully formal, don’t you think?”

Kishiar playfully teased, as if the wink laden with personal sentiment had been exchanged like a secret mission order. Yuder didn’t bat an eye, finding Kishiar’s expression much more relaxed than when they had met at the square.

“Indeed, there were many, but thank you nonetheless.”

“So? How many should I give next time to hit the sweet spot? Do tell, I’ll prepare accordingly.”

His ability to smoothly and cheekily suggest he'd give flowers again was quite impressive. Yuder sighed a laugh, almost involuntarily, and bowed his head.

"You don't have to give any. My thanks for the abundance of flowers doesn't mean I want more."

The reason he rushed here was not because of the flowers laid out. If it had been anything other than flowers, if he realized it was sent by Kishiar, his actions would have been the same.

As he lifted his head, Yuder was met with an expression he had not anticipated, and he was slightly taken aback.

"Right, that was a foolish question."

Kishiar's face was full of deep and candid emotions as he relaxed his eyebrows and smiled.

"So… would it be alright if we kissed again?"

The pupils reflecting only Yuder seemed so full of joy and yearning.

And so Yuder closed his eyes and turned his face first.

Because there seemed to be no way out of these enchanting emotions unless he did so.

"…Commander."

"Yuder."

When their lips finally parted after another long contact, their voices rang out almost simultaneously. Yuder blinked before opening his mouth again.

"You go first."

“No, it’s fine. You go.”

His voice was noticeably softer and lower than usual, caressing his slightly swollen lips.

“I’d like to use the key you gave me before, now.”

That was one of the thoughts he’d had even before seeing the flowers.

Kishiar had already laid his heart bare. He had promised not to suppress himself once they returned to the capital, and holding onto a key that could alter their relationship no longer held any meaning.

The moments of hesitation, wondering if he could handle the changes that turning the key would bring, had long since become a thing of the past.

Kishiar had let him experience, one by one, all the things he’d been worried about post-change, all while wearing the mask of playful pretense.

Social status, the words and gazes of others, and even a past life that he had believed would remain an eternal secret—once all these barriers were shattered by Kishiar, he found their significance surprisingly negligible. Acknowledging this truth lightened the weight of the key that had been subtly pressing on a corner of his heart.

“As for me, my heart…”

Yuder mumbled slowly, recalling words that Kishiar had once spoken to him in the past.

“Everything about me is already here. As for a way to recover it… I’m not sure anymore.”

“…”

“That’s all I have to say. Now, please share what you were going to say, Commander.”

My God. A barely audible sigh seemed to escape.

Yuder felt Kishiar’s arm, which was wrapped around his waist, tighten. The sensation was slightly constricting, but seeing the rare blush on Kishiar’s cheeks made everything feel okay.

“What I was going to say is… before we left the square, His Majesty the Emperor said something.”

Much later, without loosening his grip, Kishiar continued to speak about a discreet conversation that had briefly taken place between Emperor Keilusa and him, after the Cavalry’s welcome ceremony had ended.

At that time, Kishiar, as the Commander of the Cavalry and Duke of Peletta, had held the hands of both the Emperor and Empress, escorting them to their carriage. The brothers exchanged a few quiet words, so soft that not even Yuder, with his keen senses, could catch them. However, he guessed that it wasn’t bad news, given that Kishiar let out a short chuckle as the conversation ended.

“His Majesty declared that while the Cavalry is on break, I should take a break as well. He said if he hears that I’ve worked or visited the palace during the week-long vacation leading up to the next palace party, he will reprimand me severely.”

What a ridiculous command. Kishiar laughed as he spoke, and only then did Yuder understand why he had laughed earlier. After all, even the Emperor had slapped him on the back, metaphorically speaking.

“Well, I have my own ways, so I won’t comply entirely, but I suppose I should at least pretend to take a break, shouldn’t I?”

“Mmm… I suppose so.”

“And luckily, I have an attractive partner right in front of me, who just exchanged heartfelt confessions with me.”

“…”

Even though he had said something similar himself, hearing it from Kishiar made it extraordinarily difficult to bear. It seemed that even with all barriers shattered, Kishiar La Orr’s innate disposition wasn’t going to change.

“So, what do you think I should do?”

Yuder stared at the mischievous smile. For some reason, it seemed that the heat rising on Kishiar’s face was more intense than before.

‘Could it be? Is it not just my imagination?’

Yuder examined Kishiar’s face closely before asking,

“Commander, do you have a fever by any chance?”

“Ah, you noticed?”

Shockingly, Kishiar’s response was straightforward. He lightly rubbed his own face and answered,

“In fact, ever since we returned to the capital, I’ve felt like I had a fever, so I sent Nathan to the palace as a precaution. It doesn’t seem serious, but better to get a proper diagnosis.”

Come to think of it, it hadn’t even been an hour since their return, and Nathan Zuckerman was nowhere to be seen. So he had been running an errand to the palace!

‘And here I was, completely unaware… Damn it.’

It seemed that he had truly been out of his mind. Even without considering Kishiar’s unique physical condition, he had seen enough people fall ill suddenly after completing a significant mission and letting their guard down in his previous life. He should have at least considered the possibility.

Perhaps Emperor Keilusa’s strict vacation proposal was also a foresight of this situation. Yuder looked at Kishiar with a mix of astonishment and a hint of self-reproach.

Oblivious to Yuder’s feelings, or pretending to be so, the man cheerfully responded.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m not so critically ill. I think it’s more like the reins I’ve been holding back have loosened a bit, causing some minor turmoil. If my assumptions are correct, a bit of rest and medication will sort it out. Though, of course, my assistant might enjoy a solo vacation until I get up.”

Yuder quickly grasped the implication of his words.

What other reason could there be for loosening the reins as soon as he returned to the capital?

Other than the matter they had promised in the West.

Yuder remained silent for a long time before covering his eyes.

“One thing is certain.”

“What is it?”

“The first thing we should do during this vacation is look after your health.”

“I don’t need nursing, but we do have to continue some tests that we couldn’t finish earlier. And?”

Yuder lowered his hand and looked squarely into Kishiar's eyes.

His heart skipped a beat between the gaze they shared.

"…I have no intention of enjoying the vacation alone."

"Does that mean I can interpret your words the way I want to?"

The arm around his waist tightened its grip a bit more. Now, most of his body was in contact with the 'spear,' with his weight fully placed on it. Yuder felt a soft touch climbing up his back over his clothes and nodded his head.

"Yes."

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Chapter 459

Though it may be expected or surprising, Kishiar did not immediately begin his work. The reason being, it was only a short time before Nathan Zuckerman would return.

Kishiar asked Yuder whether he would prepare for their vacation together while he and his adjutant were checking on his health conditions, or if Yuder needed separate time for preparation. Thinking of his room still covered in flowers, Yuder replied that he would simply change his clothes and come up.

The path back to his quarters, following the central staircase leading from the Commander's room, felt unusually light and peaceful. Windows carefully placed between the floors were wide open, letting in the last rays of sunlight before the onset of full-blown winter.

Usually, the sound of members sweating and grunting in the training ground below would be heard, but today the place was deserted, making it eerily quiet.

Entering his room, Yuder was struck by a mixture of fresh and complicated emotions upon seeing his bags still thrown aside in neglect.

The question Kishiar had asked just before leaving the dressing room resurfaced in his mind.

'Time for preparation.'

Oddly enough, the first time he'd been with Kishiar in his previous life, they had also spent about a week together, and this time around their vacation was also a week long. However, in his previous life, there had been no opportunity for any kind of preparation. It had

been an accident, and like most accidents, it had been abrupt from beginning to end.

‘Almost all the time I spent with Kishiar felt that way, too.’

Every subsequent intimate encounter with Kishiar had also been rushed and unsettling. Neither the beginning nor the end could be adjusted by his will.

But today, he had the opportunity to prepare. According to Yuder Aile’s will, freely and without restriction. The newfound freedom felt strangely uncomfortable. It was even bizarre to him.

‘I did say I’d just change clothes and come up, but… should I prepare something more?’

Although he had no interest in sexual matters, he knew from tales in his previous life that various preparations could be quite necessary before two people became intimate. Yet, a rebellious voice inside him also questioned the necessity of such preparations, asserting that whatever was going to happen would happen regardless.

When Kishiar was in sight, everything seemed perfectly fine, but the moment he was out of view, Yuder felt awkward, like a clumsy kid. He sighed softly.

‘I’m not a child, not at this age. I should stop doing foolish things.’

To clear his thoughts, he made a sweeping gesture with his hand, summoning a gust of wind. It neatly gathered the flowers that covered the floor, leaving the furniture and other items untouched. Moments later, they floated into beautiful arrangements.

The bouquet, large enough to be a challenge for an adult man to hold, was carefully divided into vases and cups that Kanna had left, or that Ever had once gifted him. However, even after stuffing all

available places with flowers, an excessive pile remained, creating small mountains on the table and chairs.

“I’ll have to think more about what to do with the leftovers.”

Once the room was clean, it finally felt like he had truly returned to his own quarters. Yuder took off his outer garment and gloves, and pulled out fresh clothes hanging cleanly washed in his closet. Just as he was about to change, his motion hesitated for a moment over the gloves he had set aside.

Just before leaving the dressing room, a memory suddenly surfaced: Kishiar’s lips had lightly touched the tip of Yuder’s gloved finger, as if to say he would miss him.

Yuder hesitated for a moment, then slowly lifted his black glove. He pressed his lips to the second knuckle of the finger Kishiar had kissed and inhaled deeply.

Though he had told Kishiar not to restrain himself, ironically, Yuder had been holding back an intense heat that now surged from his fingertips and flowed unabated throughout his body.

His downcast eyes went quiet, gazing into an unknowable distance.

There was a polite double knock on the Commander’s room door. It was a sound that let you know right away who the person was knocking on without any introduction. Before the calm and poised knock could sound again—a knock so much like its owner—Kishiar opened the door and pulled Yuder inside.

As Yuder’s lips parted as if to call out to him, Kishiar quickly drew him into a kiss. For a moment, his body hesitated, but soon it began to respond slowly. Though they had only been apart briefly while Yuder stepped out to his quarters, the thirst for touch felt incredibly overdue.

As Yuder’s head nearly touched the door, Kishiar pulled away, swallowing his regret. He looked up at Yuder, his intense eyes momentarily flickering faintly. It was an astonishingly heart-stirring sight.

“Even though you said you were just changing clothes, you’ve taken a bath as well. Your hair is still wet.”

He decided not to mention that this sight, although frequently seen in the West, felt somewhat more special here.

“…The same could be said for you, Commander.”

“I actually prepared my bathroom for you to use. I had a small hope you might indulge me.”

“That’s…”

Usually talkative, Yuder’s lips stayed shut. Kishiar quietly observed this moment, when Yuder’s pale lips twisted and their color drained away, as fascinating and precious as a mirage. It was unclear whether Yuder knew how much Kishiar enjoyed these fleeting reactions when he felt flustered.

Now, what will your response be?

“…Isn’t there more than just this opportunity to use it?”

His expression seemed ignorant of how to make promises for the future, yet his words clearly implied an awareness of how they would be spending the next week.

Indeed, it was worth the expectation.

“That’s true.”

Smiling, Kishiar took Yuder’s hand and led him down the hallway deeper into the office. The realization that this was the first time he

was entering this usually solitary path with someone else struck him anew.

As they walked, as casually as if he were dancing, Kishiar lifted a slender glass from a decorative table at waist height. Twisting slightly, he placed it in Yuder's opposite hand, receiving an inscrutable look in return.

"Don't worry, it's not alcohol. I also just showered and felt thirsty, so I prepared this drink."

The beverage, a blend of tart and sweet fruit syrup mixed with cold water and adorned with a flower, shimmered in a faint golden light. Kishiar clinked his own identical glass against Yuder's and took a sip. Following suit, Yuder took a small drink and finally spoke.

"Did you manage to check on your condition with Zuckerman?"

"I did. It's not clear that the heat period has already returned. The fever is still present but hasn't escalated compared to before, and I have taken some antipyretic medicine."

"It's fortunate," Yuder had momentarily suspected that the heat of the heat period, which had vanished before his touch, might have returned. Judging by the fact that the overwhelming warmth hadn't come back yet, it seemed that wasn't the case. However, he was indeed responding faster than usual to the one next to him.

Normally, Kishiar would have suppressed his body heat with willpower at this point, but given their prior agreement, it was difficult. Kishiar changed the subject.

"Nathan will be assisting Hellem in the capital for the next week. There's a lot to prepare."

Upon hearing the detailed explanation, Yuder nodded seriously, a gesture so endearing that it involuntarily brought a smile to Kishiar's

face. He had selectively erased from his memory what kind of look Nathan Zuckerman had given him when following his orders.

From the moment he mentioned that he would be spending the next week together with his assistant, the faithful knight seemed to have guessed most of it without needing further explanation. The uncertain expression he wore as he left was conspicuous.

Ever since he met Yuder a long time ago, Nathan had consistently been cautious of him. Even now, although Nathan clearly recognized that Yuder Aile was a trustworthy individual, that last iota of caution never disappeared.

Kishiar wasn’t aware that Yuder himself had encouraged this caution. However, he did know that Yuder, while aware of this, had tacitly approved. Yet, that was just a tiny part of the many enigmatic facets of his assistant.

Something Kishiar had not yet figured out.

At the end of the corridor was a small space where multiple doors could be seen all at once. The bedroom used by the Commander was the furthest inside.

Almost simultaneously, the two crossed the boundary that Yuder Aile had once retreated from without encountering Kishiar beyond the door.

A sudden electric charge seemed to spark between their interlocked hands. Looking down, Yuder appeared to feel the same sensation, his eyes focused on the same spot.

How could they know this without uttering a single word?

It was a strange and mystical moment, experienced multiple times.

Their eyes met, almost simultaneously lifting to do so.

The corners of Yuder's eyes trembled as if he were angry. As soon as they stepped into the room and set down their glasses, he pulled Kishiar toward him.

Every time he felt the incredible passion emanating from his seemingly parched body, Kishiar experienced emotions so ecstatic they felt lethal.

Without a clear initiator, their lips collided. Kishiar held Yuder's waist to ensure he didn't crash into the furniture, subtly guiding him toward the bed as he shifted their direction.

Finally, their entwined bodies collapsed onto the bed, sinking into the sheets. Brushing back the disheveled black hair from his forehead and over the white sheets with his fingers, Kishiar surrendered his entire being to the one who had taken it all.

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Chapter 460

Discerning the sexual desire directed toward him had been such a frequent experience for Kishiar that it was difficult to keep count. Many nobles had looked down upon him as a foolish and dissolute scion of a soon-to-be-extinct imperial family. They treated him as if he were a perishable fruit that must be consumed before it rots away.

Of course, Kishiar was well aware that the world didn't only consist of such sticky desires, and that there was no need to be overly concerned about them. But knowing and feeling are two different things.

Therefore, it was only natural that he felt a shiver in front of the pure, gentle blaze of desire that was now directed at him.

"Ah…"

Unable to overcome the sensation building in his chest, Yuder took a ragged breath, teeth clenched. He opened his eyes, and warmth flooded the corners, as if he'd shed tears. It felt like staring at a blaze, and he couldn't help but smile.

His gaze might have looked fierce, almost angry, but it was merely because the intensity of his emotions left no room for tenderness. Kishiar sensed within those eyes a desire directed at him, unburdened by any residue or reservation.

How wondrous and lovely it was that one person could desire all of another, and that the other could reciprocate that feeling?

The young man who had flung himself into Kishiar's arms was braver than ever. He embraced Kishiar without holding back, as if

shedding all previous silences and barriers, and didn’t suppress the sensations surging within him.

In his joy, Kishiar indulged in the moment far longer than he had initially planned, but Yuder did not push him away. Though occasionally he’d furrow his brow in apparent confusion or hesitate and flutter his hand, afterward, he would invariably pull Kishiar close and return the embrace.

It felt like a representation of the relationship that had always existed between Yuder Aile and Kishiar La Orr.

The man who had claimed all of Kishiar was sometimes clumsy in his responses. Unlike others who were awkward because they didn’t know, Yuder seemed awkward precisely because he did know.

Even now, despite appearing to understand what would happen next and how bodies would unite, he couldn’t hide his discomfort and hesitation when their faces were close, engaged in intimate exchange.

When he first kissed and sucked the tip of the breast, and as he moved downward to lick the slender belly and navel, the reaction was so intense that for a moment he thought Yuder might not like it.

If Yuder hadn’t immediately wrapped his arms and legs around him to pull him close, he might have actually paused for a moment.

Kishiar had suspected this before, but Yuder Aile was incredibly sensitive. For someone who could navigate life without sight by relying on other senses, it was perhaps natural that his sense of touch was also heightened. Watching Yuder gasp and press his lips against even the places he touched without sexual intent made it impossible for any thoughts to string together in his mind.

To know that beneath that seemingly pallid and emotionless face lay such a torrent of intricate and intense sensations—known to him

alone—was both heartrending and endearing.

While Kishiar licked Yuder’s chest to soothe his nerves, Yuder, initially hesitant, gradually grew bold and pressed his teeth into Kishiar’s chest as well. When he licked Kishiar’s lean, sinewy wrist, Kishiar reciprocated by running his hand down Yuder’s arm. If one kissed the other’s stomach, the other would also press his lips to the stomach in return.

It was no exaggeration to say that they caressed nearly every part of each other’s bodies, except for the back. If Kishiar took the lead in showing something, Yuder didn’t stop at merely receiving; he returned the gesture with the same, or even greater, boldness. Kishiar laughed, slightly dazed by the heat of the moment.

Could there be a more certain moment to feel that the one entangled with him was Yuder? He felt overwhelmingly alive. Every breath Yuder exhaled, every sound he held back and released, felt fresh and beautiful. The sensuality Yuder displayed evoked thoughts of nature as it must have existed in the beginning.

Before all this, Kishiar became but a small human, worshipping it.

Moving like two free animals entwined, after satiating their long-held desires for each other, Kishiar briefly lifted his head.

“Sigh…”

Brushing aside the disheveled bangs that were in his way, he looked down to find Yuder staring back at him, his face flushed but his gaze unyielding. Despite the dampness on both their skins and the sheets, he realized anew through Yuder’s eyes that their desire hadn’t diminished in the slightest.

Those eyes were dark like a comforting shadow, illuminating nothing but Kishiar.

When Kishiar curled his lips into a small smile, Yuder slightly twitched his eyes and parted his wet lips. Just as Kishiar was captivated by Yuder, the latter was utterly vulnerable before Kishiar's smile.

Kishiar moistened his hand with the fragrant oil placed beside the bed. Rubbing his warm, heated hand against himself, what had already been standing painfully erect became even more rigid.

Should he try pulling out and reattempting due to its size? The fleeting thought passed, and as if reading it, Yuder pulled his hand to touch his equally erect spear between his legs.

"…"

At the moment their hand and legs met, his lean body quivered. Despite the rapid, almost anguished breaths in the silence, Yuder did not let go of Kishiar's hand.

In that silence, Yuder opened his mouth, and though no sound came out, the command was clear.

'Continue.'

Don't stop.

More.

Before the words even concluded, Kishiar's finger slipped inside, disappearing between Yuder's legs. Kishiar closed his eyes, feeling the sensation of a part of his body overlapping with that of his partner's. His eyelashes trembled, fully revealing the enormous heat his body felt.

"Uh…"

"Does it hurt?"

“No… it doesn’t hurt. It’s just…”

The latter words were left unsaid, but their meaning was not hard to grasp. Kishiar exhaled deeply, focusing his strength on his stomach, and gently probed inside with his oil-soaked finger. He was well aware that his hands were much larger and longer than those of ordinary people. Even just a single finger could evoke sensations beyond imagination. Particularly for someone as sensitive as Yuder.

As Kishiar’s finger twisted somewhere inside, Yuder closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Sigh…”

Kishiar had patiently tamed the inside, waiting for Yuder to get used to the sensation of a single finger. When Yuder’s tensed knee started to relax, Kishiar inserted a second finger.

“Hmm…”

Getting used to one was one thing, but two was another challenge. However, Yuder had only frowned slightly and endured it, biting his lip. The two fingers, pressed together, had moved apart slightly and began to probe and poke inside more quickly and intensely.

A wet, squelching sound was heard between the slippery legs. It seemed Yuder had heard it too, as he opened his eyes and looked down between his legs. His mouth was slightly open, panting, and his tongue seemed to be craving something. Kishiar leaned down and kissed him again.

“Mmm… Ah… Huh, uh…”

As they began to kiss, Yuder’s body had become much softer than before. As he relaxed more quickly, the fingers could also probe more boldly.

Kishiar had deliberately synchronized the movement of his tongue, which was delving into Yuder's mouth, with the movement of his fingers. At first, the sensations from above and below felt different, but as they continued, the two sensations began to merge, reducing the discomfort.

Pain and pleasure were all about perception. Kishiar hadn't wanted to cause any pain to the one he desired more than anything in the world.

Every time his tongue delved in, his fingers did the same, and when he sucked and pulled out, the fingers also gently withdrew. As they continued this rhythm, the tension in Yuder's eyes had almost disappeared. The playful movement of their tongues, taking and giving, made Kishiar happy every time it brushed against a sensitive spot.

Even when three fingers were inserted, the inside had only momentarily tightened to check the intruders but didn't push them out or become rigid.

Even though Yuder was an Omega, he fundamentally had a male body, so penetration would have been incredibly challenging. Whispering softly that he should speak up if he felt uncomfortable, Yuder had smiled faintly. A sigh had escaped him, his expression a mix of pleasure and pain.

"…I'm fine."

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Though Yuder seemed unaware, there were moments when his expression told a different story.

In instances when an ordinary person might revel in elation and let their emotions soar, Yuder diverged from his usual calm. He displayed a rare blend of tenderness and faint pain.

This hadn’t been the case initially. Gradually, though, this aspect of him had revealed itself, until now it was plainly visible even to an undiscerning eye.

It wasn’t something that had sprung up overnight. Kishiar thought as much. What Yuder had wasn’t a fresh wound that bled openly and clumsily; it more closely resembled a scar, worn down and dulled over a long stretch of time.

Even at the young age of twenty, Kishiar’s assistant was unusually shrewd and mature. But when Yuder made that face, that feeling intensified.

The problem was that this expression was not exclusive to moments shared with Kishiar.

It had flickered briefly into existence before his closest comrades, at the tail end of a mission completed without a single casualty, vanishing like a mirage before one could even blink.

The happier he was, the more tormented he seemed.

The sweeter it was, like syrup, the more it felt bitter.

Kishiar couldn’t fathom the cause of these conflicting emotions Yuder exhibited, but he chose not to address it or ask about it.

Instead, he offered silent comfort, and with a tender kiss encapsulated a wistful pain.

“Mm, ah…ah.”

Yuder accepted Kishiar’s lips without hesitation and closed his eyes as he wrapped his arms around him. When he opened his eyes again, the bitterness he had just felt was nowhere to be found.

Kishiar cupped the last of the scented oil into his palm and liberally anointed himself with it. The amount seemed excessive, but perhaps it was still not enough.

There was no sign of fear or tension in Yuder’s eyes, yet the future was uncertain. To ease the transition to what was next, Kishiar exhaled deeply to quell the intense heat that threatened to consume his mind. The sensation of a sweat droplet trailing down his chin felt strangely dull.

“Shall we… change positions?”

“How do you mean?”

Kishiar explained that it would be less burdensome for Yuder to turn over. But Yuder quickly made it clear that he had no such preference.

“I don’t want to be face down.”

Concerns about minimizing pain seemed utterly inconsequential to him. Just as Kishiar was about to say something more, Yuder pulled him close and wrapped his legs around him.

“This is fine. Just, hurry…”

Seeing Yuder’s flushed eyes as he bit his lip and swallowed his words, an intoxicatingly potent scent overtook Kishiar’s senses.

It was a scent that tugged insistently at all that Kishiar was—a scent distinctly Yuder.

Before such a call, there was no room left for contemplation.

“Ah…”

The plunge was both rapid and slow.

Though no distinct sounds emanated from between them during their union, the world seemed to roar like a tempest in their ears. As their vision swirled into oblivion, their minds struggled to hold on to reality.

And it was Yuder’s hands, once again, that pulled Kishiar back from the hot, intense waves that engulfed him.

The moment Kishiar felt the solid touch of those fingers that had slid down his neck, embraced it, and finally wormed their way through his own, he realized with stunning clarity where he stood in a given moment.

It was a moment of unity.

Something that had existed between him and Yuder was violently shaken, turned upside-down, and disappeared in a whirlwind of dust.

As if on cue, time and space lost their meaning, and only the two of them remained in the void that had turned pitch black.

Speechless, Kishiar clenched his hand around Yuder’s fingers that had burrowed into his own. Opening his eyes, which until now had only been dampened by physiological heat, he saw a novel glint of light flicker between his dark eyelashes.

Before he could even comprehend what it was, Yuder slowly lifted his hand to Kishiar’s cheek. What he stole was a droplet of

moisture Kishiar hadn’t even known was trickling down.

Kishiar blankly stared at the transparent wetness moistening his fingertips, then reached out to touch Yuder’s face. The light that silently streamed down his cheeks soaked his hand in the same hue.

A torrential wave of both immense pain and breathtaking joy surged from somewhere deep within him, a feeling he knew without a word was shared by his partner.

From somewhere deeper than the flesh.

“My God.”

How could something like this exist?

So huge, so painful, so perfect.

How could a being like you exist alongside me?

Kishiar bent his back to fully align his body over Yuder’s. The realization that he could feel every single part of the other—foreheads, noses, lips, fingers—sent a shiver down his spine.

Though it may have been a brief moment in reality, it felt eternal as their lips finally met, and gradually they returned halfway to reality. The heat that had been boiling endlessly inside Kishiar also began to slowly settle. The coupling wasn’t over, but if he were not to ruthlessly penetrate the other’s entirety, it was wise for both to stop here and move slowly.

Following his instincts, Kishiar slowly withdrew his hips while maintaining the lingering kiss and holding Yuder’s hand for support.

“Huh…”

Yuder clenched his teeth, trembling at the sensation that seemed to drag on endlessly. As he applied pressure to the legs wrapped

around Kishiar’s body, Kishiar once again gently entered him.

He was enveloped by a warm, soft swamp-like sensation, desperately accommodating him.

“…Ah.”

Yuder released a breathless sound, his eyes opening and closing.

Then, they began the rhythm again—retreating and plunging quickly, the wet sounds growing slightly louder as membranes met membranes.

It wasn’t a sound that could be produced by Kishiar alone. As he looked up, he saw Yuder’s face, his eyes wide open, watching every reaction. Kishiar smiled faintly.

As before, Yuder always acted like he had to see Kishiar’s face at moments like this. It even led Kishiar to suspect, almost with certainty, that this might be the extension of why Yuder had said he didn’t want to turn around.

People who knew little about Yuder often spoke of feeling a sense of dread when they encountered him. This fear arose from staring into an abyss so vast and pitiless that it seemed beyond any words or force to counter—few other feelings could compare for a human being when faced with such a chasm.

However, a closer look into his eyes would reveal that they contained something purer and more beautiful than anything else in the world.

Though not perfectly unblemished, that abyss had a compelling allure that captivated people all the more for its imperfections.

Despite being told to speak up if he felt pain, there was no need for such caution. Even if Kishiar couldn't fully absorb everything, he felt no sense of discomfort emanating from Yuder. Yuder was wholly alive, raising goosebumps on Kishiar's skin, moving freely, and expressing that he was fully immersed in the moment. That was enough.

Overwhelmed with unbelievable joy that Yuder was so engrossed with him, Kishiar repeatedly kissed and sucked on his flesh.

It was the first time he had ever felt so thankful for having lips.

Not just lips, but hands, feet, and even the sexual organs that he had once found cumbersome—all of it, he was grateful for in their entirety.

For the first time, the fact that his life had continued unbroken to this very day felt like a miraculous blessing.

He lifted himself up and grabbed one of Yuder's ankles. As the angle shifted, Yuder took in a sharp breath and tilted his head. Facing Yuder's questioning eyes as if asking, "What are you planning to do?", he pressed his lips against the inner ankle. Sparks flew between their dark pupils.

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As their eyes met, as if asking what was about to happen, a spark flew between the dark pupils when lips met the inside of an ankle.

“Ah… Hmm!”

It was simply an expression of the joy he was currently feeling, having always wanted to kiss those feet. Yet Yuder’s reaction was far more intense than Kishiar had anticipated. Yuder had always been sensitive to every touch and kiss, but this level of heated gaze made every other reaction seem insignificant.

“There…,”

“Didn’t you like it?”

“…”

Yuder, who was never one to hide his feelings, couldn’t bring himself to say he disliked it. He merely gritted his teeth and mumbled a single phrase.

“It’s not clean enough for you to touch with your mouth.”

As if there was any part of him that wasn’t clean enough for that.

“There’s no such place.”

Had Yuder said he didn’t like it, Kishiar would have stopped immediately, but since that wasn’t the case, it didn’t matter. With a laugh, Kishiar pressed his lips against the ankle once more. The toes and calf twitched, as if wanting to pull away, but Yuder did not withdraw his foot from Kishiar. Meanwhile, the connection between

them continued to transmit a pleasure that felt almost molten, moving smoothly or rapidly as the situation demanded.

Basking in Yuder's gaze, which seemed hot enough to consume him, Kishiar softly squinted his eyes. He'd never put much effort into appearing seductive to anyone, but he felt that if he could relish moments like this for a long time, he could do so quite easily.

Slowly moving his lips up the ankle, he pressed them against the heel and bit the well-defined Achilles tendon like a fruit. Each time, Yuder tensed his intertwined body, closing his eyes tightly and reopening them, and the moans and breaths escaping both of them progressively heightened the atmosphere.

"Ah, haa… Hmm…"

"Ha, ah…"

The body that moved robustly and elastically, savoring the stimulation Kishiar gave, never let go of their intertwined hands. Even while their bodies shook and their mouths tasted each other, Yuder's gaze never left Kishiar.

He seemed intent on figuring out everything—what Kishiar was doing, what sensations he was experiencing, when his eyes closed at a nibble or movement, and what would almost make him lose his rationality. Or perhaps, he already knew half of it.

That gaze.

The look that seemed ready to devour and relish every nuance of the pleasure the other felt was, for Kishiar, more intensely stimulating than the physical pleasure their union was bringing.

Never had anyone scrutinized his pleasure so closely, so greedily.

If anyone else had tried to do so, he would have closed himself off, feeling it to be too intrusive. But because it was Yuder, he gladly opened up.

As time passed, the rhythm of their breathing began to change, becoming shorter and faster. While Yuder's physical pleasure seemed to be more focused toward the front and other parts of his body than his rear, it was somewhat natural given that his primary gender was male. Nevertheless, his body, dutifully receiving and storing up pleasure, finally sent an urgent signal to Kishiar as it neared its limit.

Sensing Yuder's impending limit, Kishiar repositioned the ankle that had still been resting on his shoulder.

Then, as if to show off, he opened his lips that were tightly sealed, kissed the curled toes, and while looking into the slightly enlarged eyes, bit them with his tongue and teeth.

At the same time, he moved his waist and penetrated deeper than ever before. Reflexively, Yuder's insides, which had been soft to accept him, smoothly opened up, making way. The sensation of his body pushing in without any resistance and hitting a wall deep inside sent shivers down his spine.

A heat that seemed to pierce from the top of his head to his toes flashed white before his eyes.

"…"

Both of them were immersed in the intense shock and pleasure, and Yuder's mouth opened silently. His wet eyelashes trembled uncontrollably, and the strength inside his body was incomparable to before. The toes that Kishiar bit seemed to have been struck by lightning, curling up and then stretching out, and a moan filled with desire flowed out.

“Ah… Ahh…”

Yuder tried to hold himself, but before he could stop it, it started between his stiff fingers. The unstoppable liquid not only wet his palm and thighs but also splashed between his chest and Kishiar’s body.

The beautiful line drawn by his desperate and stiff body, the moment when the climaxing flesh seemed to melt, Kishiar watched it all without even taking a breath. The sight of his sweaty neck pulsating with his heavy breathing, the chest that had lost its original pale color and was now heaving, and the fingers wet with the hot and pungent liquid trembling and twitching.

Until the very end, when Kishiar’s trembling body finally calmed down and his closed eyelids opened again, he didn’t want to miss a thing. He couldn’t afford to.

And only after he was certain that he had witnessed all of it, Kishiar, with eyes shining with joy, released the strength with which he had bound his body like chains. The thing that slid out of Yuder’s insides immediately ejaculated in his hand. As he exhaled a long breath and opened his eyes that had been closed for a while, he saw Yuder’s eyes staring at him with a peculiar expression.

“…Why didn’t you just do it??”

The cold voice that came out between the breaths that hadn’t yet fully subsided was terribly provocative.

He had expected some words after it was over, but he hadn’t expected such a question, so Kishiar jokingly replied, “I thought you’d complain about me biting your toes, but is that your first question?”

“I don’t care about that. I’m more curious about why you didn’t just do it.”

To the lovely and honest question, Kishiar willingly answered, “Our primary genders are the same, but our secondary genders are different. Do you remember the research of Bertrail Shand Apeto?”

Beltrail Shan Apeto, now dead in prison, had committed horrific acts against the Awakeners in a quest to remedy his own cursed body.

He had gathered powerless commoners who had Awakened from all over the empire, almost kidnapping them. Initially, he attempted to transform himself into an Awakener by exchanging his blood with theirs, but after failing, he moved on to forcing Awakeners with second gender to conceive children, with the intention of observing the process. It was a brutal course of action born from the belief that only by understanding how certain children were born could he produce offspring not cursed with his tainted blood.

In this process, many were either killed or disposed of; half of the survivors were rescued by the Cavalry, while the other half were taken by Nahan’s forces.

Kishiar had read all the research journals Beltrail had written. Speaking with survivors who had come into the Cavalry, Kishiar’s conclusion was as follows:

“The chance of a child being born between Awakeners with second gender is extremely low. And even if conception occurs, the likelihood of the child being born safely is even slimmer. Beltrail noted in his journal that he had never seen a child born successfully. Every verified case ended in miscarriage or in the sudden death of the experimental subject.”

Two years had passed since the Awakeners had revealed themselves to the world. Beltrail had been conducting his research for nearly a year. Since the experiments were not conducted under proper conditions, there were no instances of a child being born

safely. However, Kishiar did not have even a shred of desire to associate this matter with Yuder Aile and embark on an adventure.

He looked up at Yuder, who was gazing at him with a peculiar expression, and kissed Yuder lightly on the forehead, smiling faintly.

“So, please understand.”

“…Commander, um, I see.”

Yuder, uncharacteristically for him, chose his words with great difficulty. Sensing what Yuder wanted to ask, Kishiar spoke again.

“It’s hard to be certain whether my body is capable of having a child or not. Before I became an Awakener, it would’ve been definitely impossible, but after Awakening, it’s uncertain. And it’s not something I can test with anyone.”

Even Mick Shuden, who had the ability to see the essence of things, could not provide a definitive answer on this matter, because what he could see did not pertain to the ability to conceive a child.

“…”

“Rather than that, would you come lie down next to me?”

Kishiar lay down beside Yuder and pulled him onto his body. Yuder hesitated for a moment but did not resist; he quietly and carefully rested his cheek on Kishiar’s chest. The overlapping warmth of their bodies offered a deep sense of comfort, and the lingering sensation of pleasure was pleasantly felt.

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In a cocoon of overlapping body heat, a deep sense of calm mingled with a tingling pleasure, making for a pleasantly comfortable sensation.

Yuder had said he didn’t want to engage while turning over, but touching like this should be fine. As he gently ran his hand down Yuder’s back, the warm skin beneath twitched but accepted Kishiar’s touch.

A moment later, Yuder also lifted his hand to caress Kishiar’s cheek. It was much like his previous gestures: the initial contact barely felt heavy, awkward even, but gradually grew more confident, eventually finding a stable rhythm and completing the movement.

From the cheek to just above the ear where a slight imprint remained, then to the forehead where the hair clung, and then back to the cheek again. Observing and feeling this process, Kishiar suddenly realized something.

He hadn’t noticed when he’d received similar touches from Yuder before, but this touch strongly resembled the way he stroked Yuder’s back.

‘And what this fact implies is…’

From now on, every time Yuder’s hand caressed something else, this moment and all of Kishiar would become invisible traces etched forever in that touch.

Whether Kishiar himself was present or not, it would remain as an unchanging shadow.

It was a small, insignificant thing that nobody would pay attention to, but this assurance struck Kishiar as profoundly special.

“Why are you smiling again?”

Yuder tilted his head slightly, as if he had sensed Kishiar’s mood through the contact of their skin, even though Kishiar had smiled without making a sound.

“Because I’m happy. Ah, don’t stop touching. I’d like you to keep going. Feel free to touch me however you want; I’ll continue doing the same.”

“Is it that good?”

“Absolutely. Do you know how special it is to be able to freely touch something?”

Though he answered cheerfully, his tone had a shade of darkness. Kishiar briefly thought of his brother who wore thick gloves throughout the welcoming ceremony, and of his own childhood hands encased in gloves twice as thick.

Power that was not properly controlled could indiscriminately hurt those around it, eventually tearing even oneself apart. Loved ones, childhood pets—none could escape it.

For those like him, whose power grew frighteningly quickly and became unpredictable, numerous secret barriers had been installed in various palaces of the imperial palace. Walls imbued with protective spells to minimize the impact and damage of any internal incidents appeared as nothing more than ordinary walls from the outside.

In his own bedroom in the palace, there were as many as three layers of such walls.

Always doubt yourself; never be sure.

Doing nothing is the best way to help everyone.

That was the best method to slightly delay a terrifying future, in which he might one day burst from not being able to bear his own power… Those useless yet still deeply imprinted warnings flickered in the corners of his mind, disappearing as soon as he looked into Yuder's eyes.

Kishiar skillfully hid his thoughts, and smiled.

"Hmm… so, how are you feeling? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"No pain anywhere?"

At this, Yuder glanced briefly downward with a subtly complex expression.

"…I'm fine now."

Seeing such words, it was clear that Yuder had felt overwhelmed when he had inserted himself, but the underlying meaning seemed far more positive than anticipated.

"More importantly, are you alright, Commander?"

"As far as I can tell from feeling around just now, I'm fine."

At those words, Kishiar's hand, which had been caressing Yuder's cheek, paused for a moment. It wasn't that Yuder was particularly oblivious, but he couldn't fathom why Kishiar had started by touching the areas that were easiest for checking body temperature.

"…In addition to the heat, the lower region as well."

“Lower? I’d say that’s just how it normally is.”

Yuder had briefly lain down to assess his condition and converse, but Kishiar remained in an unyielding state even after their activity. Unless forced, it seemed unlikely that it would wilt on its own in this situation.

So what? There was still plenty of time. Kishiar was a man who wanted to savor every sensation he could feel in life, be it pain or agony.

Lying beside each other, Yuder, who had felt Kishiar’s heat the entire time, seemed somewhat baffled by his attitude but soon sighed and lowered his head. Once again laying his cheek on Kishiar’s chest, he broke the silence.

“I can hear your heartbeat.”

“Well, you must’ve heard how excited I am right now.”

“…Yes. I didn’t realize it would be beating this hard.”

The tone encapsulated in the faint murmur was slightly different this time—a voice hazy like a dream and oddly melancholic.

Kishiar threaded his fingers through Yuder’s hair and whispered.

“Exactly. But it was even more intense earlier. I never thought I’d feel something like that in this world. Did you?”

Tears that had unknowingly flowed from both of them, the astonishing sensations that breathed new life into their flesh, even the oddity that made it seem as if everything existed solely for this moment—all were assuredly not felt by Kishiar alone.

Yuder did not respond, but it was okay; it wasn’t a question that required an answer.

Sometimes, words aren't needed to understand.

Perhaps it was a part of the 'connection,' like a thin thread, that had existed between them thus far.

There were no other explanations.

Before pondering the identity of that connection any further, Yuder sat up. He placed his lips against Kishiar's and then straddled him, his eyes ablaze. Somehow, Yuder himself was also half-rejuvenated.

"…I've thought about it."

Yuder, whose hand now securely gripped Kishiar's, which was larger than his own face, murmured as he looked down.

"I'd rather you didn't worry so much."

"About what?"

"As far as I know, relationships between Awakeners with second gender aren't that risky, so long as their heat period don't overlap. I'm certain of at least that. And I…"

With a gaze as piercing as a flash of lightning, Yuder spoke.

"I came here wanting every part of you, Commander."

Ah, what a bold declaration.

In that instant, the smile vanished from Kishiar's face.

Any plans for additional rest were immediately abandoned.

With a strange sense of a burning ache deep in his throat, Kishiar pulled Yuder into his arms. Their entwined bodies rolled over, this time in the opposite direction from before.

Kishiar, with fingers raised, felt the touch greedily caressing his body and moaned with eyes half-closed. Yuder, biting his lip anxiously, guided him.

“Hmm- Ah…”

The insertion was smoother than before.

Muscles, naturally toned from the traces of life and long training, writhed and clung to the other. Instead of the ecstasy felt from their previous union, a desperate desire to reach even a little more took its place.

Every moan that flowed out, revealing pleasure without filter, was met with an increasing pleasure from the other, in an endless cycle. There was no room for thought.

Suddenly, Kishiar thought their moving bodies, overlapping like white waves, seemed as if they were dancing together.

Come to think of it, maybe soon, I could really dance with you.

He wanted to say that, but the heat of the lips, biting and clinging roughly, swept away all thoughts. Every time Kishiar tried to think of something else, Yuder, as if sensing it, touched his face and pulled him closer. In front of those staring eyes, nothing could be hidden or avoided.

A towering wave surged, scratching and engulfing everything inside.

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Awakening to the sunlight streaming through the skylight, Yuder opened his eyes.

For a moment, the familiarity of the sparsely furnished bedroom almost chilled his heart. However, a strange sound he felt as he tried to move a little quickly snapped him back to reality.

It was the sound of the magic stone furnace burning stronger than usual. Each time it spewed its multicolored flames, a warm and peaceful air tickled his skin. It was a sensation Yuder had never felt in all the time he had spent here.

Yes, he was not the Commander of the Cavalry, and this was not Yuder's bedroom but Kishiar's. And the reason he woke up here was…

"…"

Turning his head slightly, Yuder soon found a blond handsome man lying beside him with his eyes closed, his arm comfortably wrapped around Yuder's waist. Even though he wore not a shred of clothing, he exuded no sense of vulnerability. His body radiated sculpted beauty under the light. As he breathed rhythmically, the shadows between his long eyelashes swayed like fruits, capturing one's gaze more intensely than any jewel.

Just as his regained sense of reality almost faded again, the sight of vivid, rugged marks on the man's chest sharply brought him back.

'…Yes.'

This was reality. More than anything, it was proof that everything that had happened yesterday was not a dream.

Yuder brushed his face with his hand and exhaled briefly. Even that small movement prompted a dizziness and lethargy in his muscles that he couldn't attribute to any particular part of his body.

The moment his body hesitated, the large hand wrapped around Yuder's skin twitched.

With barely audible breaths, the man who had been lying still with his eyes closed suddenly opened them.

"…"

Eyes met, and silence flowed. A few blinks later, a smile softly broke over Kishiar's face. The man, who seemed as inanimate as a mineral untouched by the passage of time, became a warm, living being in that moment.

"…Did you sleep well?"

"…Yes."

"Good."

The hand that had been wrapped around Yuder's waist moved up and playfully swept the disheveled hair off his forehead. The tips of his long fingers then traveled from Yuder's warm forehead down to his pale cheek, and finally paused below his swollen lips.

It was a touch they had shared multiple times before, yet somehow this time it took on an entirely different hue.

"I can't believe I slept in longer than you. This has never happened before. Even the time…"

Kishiar's gaze moved towards the ceiling as he mumbled cheerfully, looking up at the sky through the window.

“…It doesn’t seem like an illusion that the sun is about to set in a few hours.”

True to his words, the sunlight beaming down was decidedly different from morning light. Given that their lovemaking had started yesterday afternoon and only ended when the sun had risen and set again, it was no surprise.

A whole day had passed confined to this bedroom, yet it didn’t feel as if that much time had actually elapsed. Neither was he hungry nor thirsty. Aside from a slight lethargy in his limbs, astonishingly, there was no problem at all.

Yuder looked down at the finger that continued to slowly trace his lips and quietly opened his mouth. As he stuck out his tongue to lightly lick the tip, the movement of the finger stopped. When he gently bit the end and looked up, he saw that the red gaze meeting his own had shifted, taking on a slightly different light.

And the same was true for Yuder’s face reflected in those eyes.

“…Hmm. I was thinking we should probably start with a meal,” Kishiar said.

He smiled as if it were difficult, but from the beginning, it was Kishiar who had stoked this fire between them, cautiously touching his lips all the while. It was evident that they both shared the same impulse, the same joy. Yet the fact that Kishiar remained restrained until the end felt both impressive and somewhat provocative.

If there were even a slight hint of hesitation here, the man before him would certainly pull back. He would expertly cloak all traces of emotion, extending a relaxed hand as if he’d never felt any impulse from the start. And that would have been fine.

But that was not what Yuder wanted.

Yuder recalled a sensation he had briefly felt for the first time just yesterday, when their bodies had overlapped.

It was an incredibly faint and ancient feeling.

Within the invisible currents emanating from the one who touched him, Yuder suddenly felt emotions that seemed both his and not his, bursting forth like sparks.

Though he had half-forgotten this sensation, having not felt it for so long, he immediately knew what it was. It was different yet similar to the feelings of another that he'd often experienced after becoming physically intimate with Kishiar in his past life.

Among the many changes he'd experienced after physical intimacy in his previous life, he'd also felt the sudden emotions of the other person. That unfamiliar sensation was accompanied by a phantom pain that felt as if something inside him had been torn to shreds, and it made Yude suffer by making it impossible to tell whether it was his own pain or someone else's pain.

But this time was different. The moment he connected with Kishiar, Yuder felt an ecstasy similar yet far more intense than his own, a strange and warm gratitude, and at the same time, a rigid and chilly emotion directed at Kishiar La Orr himself.

That was the very source of Kishiar La Orr's patience. It was the final safeguard he had set up so as not to ruin this moment, and it was also the most secret part of him that Yuder had only vaguely sensed until now.

Even in that intensely vivid moment, it was the only thing that kept a cool eye open, targeting not the surroundings but Kishiar himself.

Yuder was not lacking in patience himself, but his own patience often led to a good compromise with his own desires. Some

baselines existed, but if something urgent enough to cross those lines appeared, he would not restrain an explosion.

This was the strength of teachings layered over innate disposition. The one who taught Yuder patience had instructed him on how to use enormous power judiciously, how to make rational decisions before emotional ones, but also said that if something more important than all of that appeared, it was alright to prioritize oneself.

And who was the one who taught him this?

It was none other than Kishiar La Orr.

The thought that the one who taught Yuder to be this way didn't apply the same principles to himself was both astonishing and somehow fitting.

Kishiar had certainly promised not to hold back, and he kept that promise. However, the cold voice directed at himself in his core was not included in that promise.

With an inexplicable feeling, Yuder's heart throbbed largely, and tenderly.

It was only then that Yuder wanted all of Kishiar La Orr, including that cold patience.

If he verbalized the knowledge he had from his past life about the Awakener, Kishiar would surely begin to suspect or notice something more, but that didn't matter.

'You taught me to be this way,' he thought.

Yuder quickly gathered his thoughts and spoke, "I'm not hungry."

"What about water?"

“Are you thirsty?”

Without lifting a finger, several droplets of water silently appeared and disappeared between them. Seeing this, Kishiar chuckled as though he had asked a foolish question and finally their lips met properly.

The instant their tongues tangled, their bodies rapidly warmed. The subtle scent emanating from Kishiar grew richer, and Yuder’s senses became keenly alert. Yuder felt a gradual firmness in the softness between his legs and twisted his head slightly.

Sliding down to Kishiar’s neck, Yuder sank his teeth in just as Kishiar leaned his neck forward and pulled him closer, their lower abdomens nearly colliding. To penetrate while lying face to face… A vague thought flitted by as a firm hand gently lifted one of Yuder’s legs and placed it on his own.

Only after another lengthy bout of lovemaking could they finally rise from the bed to prepare for a meal.

“Western food was good too, but eating back home is always better, don’t you think?”

Yuder nodded slightly, chewing quickly on the bread and fruit that Kishiar had brought on a tray, wearing nothing but trousers. Yuder was in no better state, his attire consisting only of an untied robe.

If the Cavalry had seen their Commander and his assistant sitting side by side in such disheveled attire, eating haphazardly at a table that wasn’t even in the dining room, they would’ve been shocked. But the Commander’s room remained quiet that day. There wasn’t even a single messenger bird pecking at the window, as if it were a lie.

Kishiar took the last sip of the remaining tea and set the cup down. Yuder silently refilled it with hot water, and Kishiar gave a

brief, grateful squint. “Thank you. My thirst is quenched now.”

Kishiar’s slight fever had almost completely subsided. Whether it was because he had sated his burning desire, there wasn’t a trace of fatigue on his radiant face.

Therefore, Yuder planned to examine his internal state once again after finishing their first meal of the day, post-sunset. Upon his suggestion, Kishiar readily agreed. In fact, it was something they should’ve done yesterday, but had unintentionally been delayed until now.

“What do you plan to do after you finish examining me?”

“I’m not sure.”

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If the mood had struck again, Kishiar and Yuder might have continued to tussle on the bed. However, Kishiar seemed to have something else on his mind.

“Do you have other plans in mind?”

“Resting here is fine, but it’s a rare break for us. Given it’s night, we could slip out unnoticed. How about a short walk? That is, if you’re not too uncomfortable.”

“That sounds good.”

Yuder readily accepted the suggestion. Though he had spent all day carrying something as heavy as his arm, the strain wasn’t so much that he couldn’t walk. He would have agreed even if it had been daytime.

“Let’s begin.”

After the meal, Yuder sat next to Kishiar, who was lying on the bed, and placed his hand on his exposed abdomen. A force he had grown somewhat accustomed to through two prior experiences began to pulse along the veins of his right hand, swelling and slowly emanating from them. The dark-red veins climbed up from his hand, over his wrist, and beyond the elbow.

‘Strangely… it’s smoother than before.’

Whether it was due to eating and resting well, he didn’t know. But controlling the innate power of the Red Stone had never been so easy or responsive. Before long, complex energies began to manifest within Kishiar’s body once again.

Though the jumbled nature of the energies remained, the red force that enveloped them seemed more concentrated and abundant than before. As the force encompassed the central vessel, Yuder didn't get a negative impression but decided to inquire cautiously anyway.

"The energies flowing within you have all manifested. The Awakener power seems to have increased in volume. Does it hurt?"

"Not at all."

As Yuder's eyes began to gleam a bright gold, Kishiar looked up and offered a faint smile.

"Understood. This time, I'll examine whether I can manipulate this Awakener energy. If something feels off, please let me know immediately."

Yuder slowly moved his hand, which was enveloped in red energy. The Awakener energy located below the abdomen pulsed in rhythm with Kishiar's heartbeat. As Yuder cautiously touched the tip of it, Kishiar's fingertips twitched.

"…"

After a moment, the red energy began to move ever so slowly along Yuder's fingertips. The energy, following the trajectory of his finger, ascended along the skin and disappeared among other red energies that enveloped the vessel. The movement was impeccably clean.

'It seems I can manipulate the existing Awakener energy within.'

He had thought it wouldn't resist, being of the same nature, and indeed it didn't. Even though he had been confident, a wave of relief washed over him after succeeding. Concentrating to that extent had made his eyes and body feel fatigued.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I saw the movement, and there’s no problem.”

Some finesse would still be needed, but that was a matter for time and effort to resolve. Yet what Yuder wanted to try wasn’t over. Ignoring the sweat on his brow, excitement shone on his otherwise calm face.

“In that case, may I attempt one more thing? The chance of variables occurring will be much higher this time…”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I want to insert my own energy into the Awakener energy that you possess.”

“Your energy?”

“Yes. After considering it for some time, I’ve concluded that this is the most suitable method to test for the well-being of both you and the Emperor.”

Within the bodies of Awakeners, small amounts of energy were stored—energy that had been emitted by the Red Stone that influenced their world. While the amount and nature of this energy varied from person to person, Yuder uniquely possessed its most pure form.

As the mage Thais Yulman had done—separating energy and storing it within a medium for later use—it was also conceivable that this energy could move between people. The variable was that, as Yuder had experienced, the potency of this pure energy could disrupt the balance. However, Yuder believed that the energy stored within him had weakened to some extent through adaptation, making the experiment worth attempting.

Rather than directly manipulating the energy stored in the medium separated by Thais Yulman, it would be easier and less risky to try moving the energy that Yuder could easily handle himself.

After listening to all this, Kishiar pondered for a moment before nodding his head.

“Alright. Let’s try it.”

However, he added one more condition.

“But to absorb the energy from elsewhere, the receiver also needs their own will and strength. Since my Awakener ability facilitates such an exchange, can we try using it together?”

Kishiar La Orr’s power was either to pull something towards him or to push it away. Contemplating this, Yuder’s thoughts momentarily swirled.

“…Can your power affect things that are intangible?”

Yuder had only seen Kishiar use his power to avoid injury when leaping from great heights or to ascend a tree as if walking on flat ground. To Yuder’s knowledge, in his previous life Kishiar mainly used his power to enhance physical attacks against enemies. Although it was a formidable power, it was directed at tangible objects, not intangible ones.

“I haven’t tried it yet. But if there’s a will, it’s not impossible, is it? Haven’t I often said the same to the other members?”

Kishiar’s smiling face sent a jolt through Yuder’s heart.

After a long silence, Yuder slowly nodded.

“If it starts to seem even slightly dangerous, we’ll stop immediately.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. Good. Let’s begin.”

Both of their energies began to activate. As Kishiar’s power started moving, it became apparent that the energies on his body, resembling a mapped pattern, were also shifting in response.

Watching the red energy smoothly fluctuate and extend, Yuder felt as if some invisible force was drawing his hand toward Kishiar. The sensation was similar to the feeling of the Earth pulling him back down after leaping into the air.

Moving energy already inside Kishiar was not the goal; instead, Yuder aimed to transfer his own energy to another. It felt like groping through an utter darkness with only a sense of direction. Yet, as one side pushed and the other pulled, a direction slowly became visible.

Inhaling deeply, Yuder focused on the energy that stained his hand red. If he could transfer even a small amount of the most pure energy that he had struggled for so long to assimilate, everything could change. However, the energy was reluctant to follow Kishiar’s pulling force; it didn’t quite obey.

After much effort, he was drenched in sweat. Kishiar was no different, but his gaze never wavered from Yuder for even a moment.

Though he hadn’t uttered a single moan, it didn’t necessarily mean he was untroubled.

Yuder’s face concealed an indescribable sensation, one he bore without revealing.

The moment he saw those eyes, which still held a quiet resilience, a sudden torrent of intense emotion surged within him.

What was the point of all this strength and effort if he couldn’t succeed for the man who would willingly sacrifice his own body to save his last remaining kin, and for the sake of Yuder Aile?

If his body had become another conduit for the Red Stone, shouldn’t he rightfully be able to wield its power as he pleased?

He wanted to move this power.

He wanted to endlessly chase after the force that Kishiar so desperately called to him.

“…Ah.”

The moment his agonizing thoughts concluded, a sudden surge of power tingled through the muscles of his hands and arms. A crimson energy, emanating from Yuder’s fingertips, swiftly spread across his shoulders, chest, and neck. The appearance was grotesque, but he didn’t care. Something had finally begun to move.

An unseen energy surged from Kishiar’s body, pulling in something akin to a tiny speck that had left Yuder’s hand, swirling it in like a vortex. Completely engrossed to the point where he didn’t even feel the tingling in his swollen eyes and hands, Yuder watched this miraculous spectacle unfold.

And then, a moment later.

A clump of red light, smaller than a fingernail, revealed itself as it swirled around the forces within Kishiar.

It was a success.

“…”

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In a state of rapid breath, Yuder watched as the sight of the tiny light melted into the red aura that had been enveloping the vessel. Only then did he relax his muscles and lower his head. His body was drenched in sweat, as if he had never bathed at all.

Yet his mood was considerably relieved. He wasn't planning to end things here; he would observe the progress and try again. As he raised his head to check on Kishiar, he paused at the sight of an unexpected expression on the man's face.

"Commander?"

"Well, why don't you lie down for a moment?"

As if he had been waiting for this moment, Kishiar calmly smiled and pulled Yuder onto the bed where he had just been lying. The movement was so fluid that Yuder didn't even have time to ask why.

"Is there anywhere that hurts?"

"None."

"That can't be."

With conviction, Kishiar placed his hand over the exposed chest of Yuder. Only then did Yuder realize that dark-red marks had spread across his chest. Midway through their operation, he felt a force suddenly breaking through, and suspected this might be the reason.

"Um… how far have they spread?"

"Seeing for yourself would be faster than asking me."

Kishiar picked up a desk mirror nearby. Reflected in the beautifully silvered mirror was a face that looked as bad as a plague patient's. Besides one eye that still shone golden, crimson streaks swelled and spread from his neck to his chin.

Yuder finally understood Kishiar's reaction.

"It does look serious, but I assure you, it doesn't hurt. Really. See, it's fading."

The pain he had felt in his eyes and body had disappeared as if it were a lie as soon as everything was over. All that remained was an afterglow. Moreover, the dark red marks that had extended to his chin were subtly fading, promising to subside to its previous level if left alone.

However, Kishiar seemed reluctant to judge the situation just by his words. Smiling after hearing the explanation, he immediately opened the drawer of a dresser and took out a resplendent ruby holy symbol and a purification stone, both of which were familiar.

'This is…'

"Priest Lusan is not here now."

Kishiar, the only one who could wield divine power, wound the gold chain attached to the holy symbol around his bare arm and tugged it tightly.

He handled the precious artifact so casually it might have been considered sacrilegious, but Yuder was the only other person present. To Kishiar, his body was far more important than any historical relic.

Would it really be okay to use divine power right after the experiment? Just as Yuder thought he should suggest leaving it be, Kishiar reached out and gently patted Yuder's head.

“It’s fine. Now, stay still.”

Effectively nullifying Yuder’s concerns, Kishiar held the purification stone and poured his divine power into it. The stone glowed softly, and as he held it against Yuder’s skin, a refreshing sensation began to sweep through his body.

The pain he’d felt when he’d first used it was completely absent this time. On the contrary, it felt as if strength was gradually returning to his weary body.

After a while, the dark red veins that had spread across Yuder’s body had mostly faded, just as he’d expected. Rather than diminishing, they seemed to be absorbed deeper into his flesh. Only after most of the dark red energy had disappeared did Kishiar finally cease using his divine power. By that point, about ten extremely expensive purification stones had been reduced to useless rocks.

“…”

The man examining Yuder’s face set down the last purification stone he’d been holding and released the spell. A moment of silence passed as his gaze seemed to scrutinize the results. Yuder was about to reflexively apologize, but then remembered advice he’d received in the West, which warned him not to diminish a just decision with a momentary apology. He closed his mouth.

It was clear that Kishiar was shocked by what had happened. However, Yuder didn’t regret what he’d done. That didn’t mean he had forgotten his promise to continue cooperating with Kishiar.

Kishiar, too, must have known this, and his decision to use the purification stones was likely his own way of settling his startled feelings and concerns. Therefore, Yuder felt he should also make an effort to understand Kishiar’s actions.

Yuder felt that something more needed to be said than just assuring he was alright.

After a moment lost in thought, Yuder spoke first.

“I did say I would stop immediately if it seemed like a problem would arise, but it seems that the criteria were weighted too heavily towards you.”

“…”

“So I think it would be a good idea to have a mirror beside us during these kinds of events, so we can quickly check any changes in our bodies.”

“…Alright.”

Instead of apologizing, Yuder spoke these words and held a mirror. Only then did Kishiar smile again. The smile that raised the corners of his lips and slightly furrowed his brows was different from the beautiful one he’d displayed just moments before. But this one felt more natural and conveyed a more genuine emotion.

“Good idea.”

Kishiar grasped the hand that held the mirror.

Although he couldn’t quite put it into words, Yuder felt that Kishiar also understood the meaning behind his words in that moment.

It felt as if they had exchanged something invisible.

“…Yuder. Shall we postpone our nighttime stroll?”

“No, as long as you’re not tired, I’m fine.”

“Alright. Let’s go then.”

After another bath, Yuder put on the clothes that Kishiar had provided. The casual clothing with a hat that was good for covering the face fit Yuder surprisingly well. When Yuder asked where he'd found such new-looking clothes, Kishiar replied that he'd prepared a few sets just in case for days like today.

'Days like today…'

The phrase seemed to have multiple meanings.

Using a magic tool to change his face, Kishiar led the way through deserted streets, ghost-like, before finally heading into the bustling nightlife of the Seventh Wall District. Drunks, seemingly enjoying the night, were seated at outdoor tables set up outside bars, loudly singing songs.

'The night's quite chilly, yet they're in high spirits.'

Just as he was about to pass by, Yuder heard a familiar voice among the drunkards.

"Everyone stop drinking now! If you drink any more, you'll pass out before you even get to Steiber's house!"

"Ah, Gakane. What's that? Need more booze? Fine. One more bottle, please!"

"No. I said no."

"…"

Astonishingly, they were members of the Cavalry. Gakane Bolunwald was busy patting their backs and shoulders, trying to recruit at least one person while the familiar, though not particularly close, members laughed and drank. Gakane seemed keen on stopping them from drinking any more, but his attempt was thwarted

when a new bottle of liquor made its appearance from within the establishment.

“Ah, look at these familiar faces,” Yuder mumbled softly, seemingly realizing who Gakane was looking at.

“Want to join them?”

“No, I’m considering strengthening our training schedule once the vacation ends.”

Drinking was fine, but one should never lose oneself in it. Most members knew their limits even when inebriated, but those hanging out with Gakane were notorious for their love of alcohol among the members.

It might not be a problem now, but it could be in the future. The best way to teach self-control was through training.

A bigger smile spread across Kishiar’s changed expression, perhaps sensing the sincerity in Yuder’s words.

“Reassuring,” he said.

They walked past the tavern where Gakane and the members were seated, heading deeper into a darker alley. The noise faded, gradually replaced by darkness and silence.

Kishiar continued to stride confidently, as if he knew exactly where he was going. Yuder was a bit curious about where this walk would ultimately lead, but he silently followed behind.

And finally, crossing a certain alley, something they had seen before revealed itself.

It was a broad wall filled with numerous sword marks.

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‘This…’

“Do you still remember the promise I made when we were last here?”

Kishiar approached the starting point of the wall, placing his hand on the ancient stone and looked back. The night wind brushed his now light brown hair, making it dance before vanishing. The sight felt as distant as a dream.

Yuder stared blankly at Kishiar’s smile and gave a slight nod.

“…Yes.”

When they had previously visited this place, Yuder had asked whether Kishiar had left any sword marks amongst the many etched on the wall. Although no one had surpassed the long mark left by the First Emperor, Yuder thought that maybe Kishiar could.

Back then, Kishiar had laughed and said he was overestimating him, but promised that he would try it some other time. He had intended to show it after the relationship between him and the divine sword was made public, but they were already in the west when the new owner of the divine sword was announced, making it impossible to keep the promise.

“I wanted to show you as soon as we returned. I’m glad I can now.”

And now, he was reaffirming that promise.

Yuder had been curious all this while what sort of mark Kishiar would have left, but he had half-forgotten about it due to numerous

other events. Yet, Kishiar had not forgotten that small conversation from back then. This realization struck Yuder as profoundly surprising.

The meaning of that small promise still occupying space in Kishiar's memory, despite his mind being filled with so much other information, gave Yuder a newfound sense of certainty that sent shivers down his spine.

Yuder looked at Kishiar's smiling face and slowly opened his mouth.

"Is it possible… even without a sword?"

"A sword? Who said anything about not having one?"

Grinning, Kishiar surveyed the surroundings. Seeming to discover something in the darkness, he muttered, "Ah, there it is," and soon returned from a nearby thicket with something in hand.

It was a discarded wooden stick.

"Do you know that after the announcement that someone had become the new owner of the divine sword, challengers to this wall suddenly increased? Some people seemed to think it was a rather stylish form of protest, but it caused headaches for the capital's security forces who had to clean up these broken wooden swords."

Hardly anyone would retrieve a broken wooden sword after using it. Kishiar whispered as if telling someone else's story. Although the reaction had not been positive after Kishiar was announced as the owner of the divine sword, he hadn't known that it had led to such a situation.

'That's unbelievable,' thought Yuder as he took a closer look at the wooden stick Kishiar held. The discarded stick was so poorly

carved that the handle and the blade seemed indistinguishable. The end was broken and frayed.

Kishiar lightly held the stick, resembling more a club than a sword, and swung it around a few times with a refreshing smile.

“There, now we have a sword. No problem, right?”

“Are you really going to do it with that?”

“Yes. This should be enough.”

While he spoke as if joking, Kishiar’s eyes did not betray any signs of jest. He was serious.

Yuder had often heard the saying that a true swordmaster doesn’t choose their weapon. He had even seen a foreign swordmaster in a previous life who had picked up a broken blade, cloaked it in sword energy, and charged back into the fight.

Even so, the shattered black sword was hardly a sword at all, and the stick in question didn’t even qualify as a wooden sword. There was doubt as to whether such a child’s toy could withstand Kishiar’s sword energy.

‘It would be fortunate enough if it doesn’t explode.’

Though thankfully no one was around, if the stick couldn’t withstand the sword energy and did explode, the first to bear the consequences would be Kishiar himself.

Unaware that Yuder was gearing up to unleash his power at any moment, Kishiar casually slung the stick over his shoulder. Scanning the countless sword marks etched into the wall, he walked with the leisure of a predator finding its ideal spot. No sign of worry or anxiety could be discerned in his gait.

“This should be a good spot.”

Where he stood was far enough from the wall to take in all the sword marks at a glance. Most eye-catching among them was ‘The Emperor’s Sword Mark,’ the very reason the wall existed in the first place.

Stretching from one end of the wall to the other, the mark was so long that dozens of people would have to hold hands to span its length. Though it had dulled and corroded over the passing millennium, it still offered an overwhelming sense of awe to those who beheld it.

Gazing at the mark so enormous it defied belief that a single sword could have created it, Kishiar suddenly spoke.

“Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why the First Emperor left this mark?”

“I do not.”

“During the construction of the capital, Archmage Luma, who directed the entire process, declared that he would leave upon completing the final wall. He actually packed and prepared to leave. However, the Emperor and Empress found out and caught up with him.”

Kishiar’s sword hand was rock-steady.

“The Emperor sliced through the nearly completed city wall with his sword, blocking the Archmage’s path. Thanks to this, the Archmage had to abandon his departure and return. In other words, The Emperor’s Sword Mark is…”

His voice gradually lowered, and a soft yet intense energy emanated from behind him.

“A testament to desperation.”

A testament so desperate that nothing else mattered, neither front nor back, nor the surrounding area.

A blue aura began to flow like a stream down Kishiar’s hands, tightly enveloping the wooden stick. The aura continued to intensify, eventually surging higher than the stick itself.

In a world where countless people have died unable to handle even a wisp of sword aura, such a bright and distinct aura was extraordinary.

Amazingly, the stick he held neither exploded nor wavered. Yuder’s entire body reacted to the aura, every hair standing on end. The spectacle was so overwhelming that it was difficult even to breathe.

“…Now, shall we test just how desperate I am?”

Kishiar slowly lifted the wooden sword and, exhaling deeply, changed its direction sideways. To any trained eye, it was an unassailable, textbook-perfect ready stance.

It may have looked simple and easy, but Yuder knew how immensely challenging it actually was.

Among all those learning the sword, perhaps one in ten could train consistently every day without stopping. And among them, finding someone who could maintain a flawless, textbook-perfect stance, without the slightest deviation, for even an hour was a one-in-a-thousand occurrence.

It was a beauty that could only be achieved through relentless practice, not innate talent.

That beauty stood like a shadow behind Kishiar La Orr.

How much had he practiced? How many hours had he endured to reach this level, only to suppress it again so that no one would know? The weight of it was so heavy that it was impossible to even guess by looking; it compelled the eye to remain fixated.

And finally, Kishiar took a deep breath, gripping his wooden sword tightly. His arm moved, the broken tip of the wooden sword cleaved the air horizontally, and following it, a silent azure sword aura illuminated the darkness…

"…"

The blue light gently covered the ancient wall's ruins like moonlight.

After the sharp yet soft light cut through the wall and disappeared, Yuder saw a new sword mark left just above the Emperor's in the trembling earth.

At a glance, it was strikingly similar to the Emperor's sword mark—a tremendously long trace clearly covering the wall.

Words could not capture the sensation that made his fingers and toes tremble minutely. Kishiar, his wooden sword now sheathed, simply looked at the sword mark he had left in silence.

Since there was no momentary sharing of emotions like when their bodies had intertwined, Yuder couldn't know what Kishiar was feeling right then. Yet there was no regret in not knowing.

It was enough just to have seen this moment, to have watched Kishiar La Orr.

With a sigh, he exhaled the breath he had been holding, tinged with emotion. Reacting to the sound, Kishiar turned his head. The moment their eyes met, he smiled with an almost boyish face.

“…The surroundings are getting noisy. Shall we run?”

As he said, a small disturbance was indeed unfolding around them as the anomaly was detected. Yuder wordlessly took the hand Kishiar offered. With a smile, Kishiar gripped his hand and they ran.

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The next day, as soon as morning broke, astonishing news spread throughout the capital.

“What? Another ‘Emperor’s Sword Mark’ has appeared?”

The wall where the first Emperor had left his sword mark had actually been one of the less popular relics among the people. Most commoners hardly knew what the wall was, and those who did generally showed little interest unless they had a particular fascination with swords.

Recently, young people had started to show up to challenge the wall in the name of ‘the honor of the new sword’ or some such thing, but their efforts had largely been ignored, amounting to little more than additional trash to be cleaned up.

But today was different. Since The Emperor’s Sword Mark was made a thousand years ago, it was likely the first time so many people had flocked around the wall.

People craned their necks and pushed their way closer, trying to get a better look at the massive parallel sword marks engraved on the wall. Such was the level of interest that even the ‘Emperor who had revealed himself after so many years,’ who had been the focus of everyone’s attention just a day ago, was temporarily pushed to the background.

“Really, another mark has appeared on top of the original one! Could a human have done this?”

“Who could it be? Is there a knight capable of such a feat?”

“The only Swordmaster in the capital is General Mook, right? So it must be him!”

“What are you talking about? His mark is right there! It even has his nameplate attached! It’s much smaller than the Emperor’s mark! And if he did it, why would he hide the fact?”

People who claimed some knowledge of swordsmanship argued loudly among themselves until someone secretly passed on a rumor.

“I heard from the person who discovered it last night that when they felt an unusual vibration and came to look, no one was here. If you don’t believe it, you can ask the shopkeeper over there.”

The individual who had suddenly left a sword mark on a wall that had shown no change until the previous evening had vanished like a mirage. Soldiers who had come to investigate, initially skeptical and expecting to deal with drunkards’ nonsense, had promptly returned in total disbelief.

“Geez, if it’s not General Mook, then who could it be? And why did they leave without revealing themselves?”

The evidence was there, but the identity of the person who had performed such an astonishing feat was unknown. It was unbelievable, but the reality before their eyes couldn’t be denied.

“Make way, all of you!”

Just then, a few knights forced their way through the crowd. The commoners, upon seeing their gleaming armor and spotless uniforms, backed away in fear.

“My God, it’s the Imperial Knights.”

Leading the knights was a man with red-brown hair, his face as emotionless as ice. A few people gulped as they noticed the insignia

on his armor, indicating he was the Commander of the Imperial Knights.

Commander Theorado of the Imperial Knights stood in front of the sword marks, seemingly indifferent to the throng around him. His gaze was fixed intently on the wall before him.

As if by doing so, he could somehow discern the identity of the one who had made the mark.

“Did he come to investigate the sword mark…?”

“Maybe, or maybe he’s the one who made it.”

“…Let’s go.”

However, Theorado soon turned around. As bewildered as the crowd was, the knights who had followed him looked equally puzzled.

“Commander, have you already discovered something?”

“I don’t think there’s a need to investigate further.”

“Ah, was it just magical trickery after all? I knew it. I thought it would be nothing more than a rude prank, not worth our attention.”

“No, it’s genuine.”

Theorado replied in a subdued tone.

“It was drawn properly in one go using sword aura; it’s a genuine Swordmaster’s sword mark. That’s why there’s no need to look further.”

The knight who had loudly speculated that it was fake closed his mouth, visibly chastened. Other knights, who had been quietly

harboring similar thoughts, discreetly rolled their eyes, grateful they hadn't spoken out first.

As they followed behind Theorado, noticeably more subdued than when they'd arrived, the stifled voices of the onlookers erupted almost in unison.

"Did you hear that? It's genuine!"

"A mark left by a Swordmaster! Who on earth could it be then?"

—-

"Having given him a day off to rest, and he pulls off something like this?"

Leaning against the back of his bed and reviewing documents, the Emperor sighed and pushed his hair back.

"Ever since he was young, whenever he received an order he didn't like, he'd commit some outrageous and nonsensical act. No matter how old he gets, that disposition shows no signs of changing."

Spread out on his lap was a detailed report about the mysterious sword mark that had suddenly appeared last night. While nobody had yet identified the culprit, the Emperor instantly knew who it was.

There were, officially, two Swordmasters in the capital besides General Mook. One was the cautious and devoted knight who would never do such a thing. The other was that knight's master and, for whatever reason, someone entirely capable of this sort of stunt—the Emperor's own brother.

The Emperor thought he'd be more surprised if the perpetrator wasn't Kishiar La Orr.

“If Commander Theorado left the scene right after checking it out, it means he’s already figured out who it is. Have others not come yet?”

“None so far,” replied the chamberlain, refilling the Emperor’s cup with freshly brewed tea.

“That’s fortunate… He has no interests other than the sword, so he won’t gossip about this. The situation in his family has conveniently settled down, and as for other interested parties…”

Muttering to himself as he sipped his tea, the Emperor’s thoughts were a flurry of complex matters fusing and breaking apart in a continual cycle. Knowing well what state the deep-thinking Emperor would get into, the chamberlain skillfully interjected.

“Your Majesty, my apologies, but the tea will cool again. Her Majesty the Empress did send over the last harvested leaves of the year, and didn’t you say you wanted to enjoy it while it was hot?”

“…Right.”

The Emperor finally broke away from his train of thought and turned his attention back.

As he resumed drinking his tea, the Emperor’s gaze, however, remained fixed on the same page of the report. But this time, he was not lost in thought; his mood had subtly but surely softened.

“…To think he’d protest in this manner to convey that he’s perfectly fine. I really hadn’t considered it.”

“Yes, it’s truly remarkable. A sword mark that can match that of the First Emperor himself. It’s something nobody has achieved in a thousand years. It will certainly be remembered throughout history.”

“Indeed, if the former Emperor and Empress knew about this, they would be both shocked and pleased just like me.”

A faint smile touched the corners of the Emperor’s lips before quickly fading away. The warmth of his smile was replaced by a chilling solemnity, as if touched by a winter wind.

“I had planned to showcase Kishiar’s strength as soon as he returned anyway. Fortuitously, he took the initiative to act first, so that saves us some effort. Bring me fresh parchment. I need to write a letter to the Cavalry.”

“Yes.”

The chamberlain, who had been smiling, exited the room. The Emperor slowly rose from his bed and walked toward the window. A dull ache emanated from somewhere within his body, but it was a tolerable pain.

The view outside his window had changed somewhat from before. The palace grounds, once empty, were now bustling with people. Most were there to prepare for a party under the Emperor’s orders, but among them were nobles who stood there every day, hoping to gain an audience with him.

They were curious about the Emperor’s health, how much he had recovered, whether he would resume direct involvement in state affairs following the Cavalry’s welcome ceremony, and a myriad of other matters. Of course, the Emperor had no intention of indulging their curiosity.

‘They must be incredibly curious. They thought I was quietly sinking into oblivion, and now, suddenly, I’ve made a move. They must wonder if this is the last twitch before death, or if something has changed.’

The fact that the nobility was not responding to this ‘new incident’ was proof enough that their attention was wholly fixated on the Emperor’s well-being and were unable to pay attention to anything else.

‘How delightful it is to easily guess the inner workings of the enemy without even making a strenuous effort to infiltrate their core?’

Kishiar must have also acted with this kind of impact in mind.

‘Even though it looks like he acts without thinking, he’s never actually done so.’

Their preoccupation with the Emperor’s condition would soon become an opportunity for the Emperor and those who followed him.

Soon, the chamberlain returned, offering up parchment infused with a pleasant fragrance. The Emperor sat down at his desk, dipped his pen in ink, and began to write his letter without hesitation.

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“His Majesty has expressed that voicing complaints about the forced vacation this way is more than sufficient. Apparently, they’ve set up barriers around the area because so many people have been gathering and it nearly caused an incident. Ah, everyone must’ve had a tough time.”

On the third day of his vacation, at midday, Yuder lay down, staring at Kishiar’s face as he casually read the letter brought by the courier pigeon that had arrived for the first time in three days. Listening to Kishiar’s soothing voice, Yuder felt as if his eyes were heavy, sprinkled with sleeping powder.

‘I had planned to read the translated research journal of the First Tain Duke today… Was it because I didn’t sleep well last night?’

Last night, after Kishiar had carried out the extraordinary feat, Yuder had spent the night half-awake in a blend of excitement and anxiety. He was thrilled by the incredible miracle he had witnessed, yet concerned whether Kishiar would be alright after absorbing his energy.

However, even after watching all night, he had found no issues with Kishiar’s body. Even after a day had passed, not just his cheeks and lips but even the blood flow between his legs appeared overly vibrant.

Just to be sure, Yuder opened up the flow of energies in Kishiar’s body again first thing in the morning. He even attempted to maneuver one of the tiny streams of energy entangled in Kishiar using the Awakener’s power.

If Yuder had done it alone, it would have been a very cautious and difficult process. However, Kishiar assisted him with his own

power, making the task much easier than expected.

It felt like he would soon get the hang of it to be able to do it alone with a few more tries.

‘After moving the energy, I could also untangle it directly, strengthen it, and lastly… perhaps I could correct the elements that disturb the balance from my end.’

Thinking such thoughts, he quietly closed his mouth, waiting for the continuation of the conversation. But no voice came. When Yuder turned his head, Kishiar finally added, as if he had been waiting for it:

“While I can’t say that I had absolutely no intention of complaining, don’t misunderstand. What happened last night was to fulfill a promise I wanted to keep, and His Majesty is not yet aware of that fact.”

Yuder blinked a few times before mumbling quietly, “I’m fine with it.”

He had suspected Kishiar would do something ever since he wasn’t particularly submissive about the forced vacation order. If one could achieve two purposes with one action, it would be stranger not to do so.

Yuder was more than satisfied just by having witnessed last night’s miracle up close, so he didn’t care about the rest.

“Instead, if His Majesty bothered to send a letter himself… is he alright?”

“Are you worried about His Majesty?”

Kishiar responded softly.

“Of course, I am.”

“Then let’s dine at the Sun Palace tonight.”

The suggestion was so natural that even Yuder, who considered himself immune to Kishiar’s usual charm, took a moment to understand its implication.

“Excuse me?”

“The letter says so. If you have nothing else to do, come and have the dinner we couldn’t share because of that unfortunate incident.”

“Is His Majesty saying he will lift the ban on you entering the Sun Palace?”

“No. The ban remains. But going to the palace boldly on my own accord, and sneaking in to just have dinner at His Majesty’s invitation, are slightly different things.”

So it was that the Emperor had discreetly written for Kishiar to make a brief visit to the palace.

In his previous life, Yuder Aile had often received similar instructions from Emperor Katchian, so understanding the message wasn’t too difficult. Of course, Emperor Katchian had never extended the invitation for something as warm-hearted as a meal.

“Understood. Please proceed.”

“Proceed? Didn’t I just say? Tonight’s dinner is to be at the Sun Palace. That invitation includes my assistant as well.”

Only then did Yuder realize that he had slightly misunderstood Kishiar’s intention.

‘…He wants us both to join him for dinner at the palace?’

Although it was a casual, unofficial meeting during a vacation, the palace was not a place one could easily visit on a whim. This was especially true for Yuder Aile, who was merely a member of the Cavalry. He had considered that they might eventually meet to discuss Emperor Keilusa's treatment, but he had never imagined that their first meeting would be like this.

Yuder swallowed his astonishment before replying.

"I doubt His Majesty would have specifically invited me."

"Of course not."

Kishiar calmly nodded, his lips curving into a slight smile.

"However, every time I've entered in this manner before, I've usually been accompanied by Nathan. I assume His Majesty will think the same about you accompanying me this time."

"You mean you've dined with the Emperor, with Nathan before?"

"Quite often. In the past."

Kishiar's words left Yuder speechless, and Kishiar studied his expression with squinted eyes.

"Don't fret. If you're planning to heal His Majesty, isn't it better to get to know him first?"

"…"

"If I've learned anything from yesterday and today's experiences, it's that manipulating the energy within someone else's body is not an easy task. The reason it worked relatively smoothly for us is likely because we know each other well."

Yuder had vaguely reached the same conclusion himself. Kishiar softly brushed Yuder's cheek with his finger and leaned in for a kiss.

“In any case, I’ll need to inform His Majesty about this and give him time to prepare and decide. The sooner we start, the better. An informal setting like tonight is perfect for this sort of discussion.”

“…Understood. Then I’ll join you.”

At Yuder’s heavy, yet resolute reply, Kishiar grinned briefly.

“Good. But there’s one more thing I’d like to say.”

“What is it?”

“I intend to participate in treating His Majesty as well.”

For a moment, Yuder’s mind went blank.

Ever since he first decided to heal and save Emperor Keilusa, who was fated to die, Yuder had imagined countless scenarios. But none of them had included Kishiar saying something like this.

“What… are you saying? You, joining in? That’s absurd.”

“Why is it absurd? Think about everything we’ve done so far.”

Kishiar’s face remained calm, as if he had anticipated Yuder’s objection.

“Tasks that were difficult alone became much easier when we combined our strengths. My power complements what you’re trying to do exceptionally well. I’ve tested it on myself, and it worked; I think it would be worth attempting on His Majesty as well.”

“Did you really expend your power to confirm that?”

“Yes. I had planned to step back if my powers were ineffective, but now that I’ve learned they also work on intangible targets, there’s no reason to do so.”

Kishiar was unyielding. But the composure in his eyes unmistakably signaled that he had made up his mind.

Yuder bowed his head slightly before speaking.

“However, using the power that you wield on yourself is different from this situation. If we’re not careful, both of us could be in danger.”

“That risk exists for you as well. You should be aware of that.”

“I am, but…”

It didn’t matter what happened to him. He had grown fairly confident that the pure power of the Red Stone, which he had manipulated multiple times, would bring him pain at times but would not kill him. But Kishiar’s life was different. He wanted to say that, yet the words wouldn’t come out easily.

The expression that the man before him would wear if he said that had vividly flashed in his mind.

“Yuder.”

Kishiar called his name. He reached out and gently stroked Yuder’s furrowed forehead.

“I’m not suggesting that we try this today. All we’re doing today is formally introducing you to His Majesty and having dinner together. To treat His Majesty, we need to first make a thorough diagnosis and consider the best options, and we also have to listen to his opinions.”

“…”

“And I have no intention of letting you handle everything alone, knowing that I can help. If you were in my position, you would have told me the same. Wouldn’t you?”

Yuder lightly bit his lip.

“Think it over. I’m not asking you to choose this option because I don’t trust your capabilities as an assistant, but because if there is a way to increase the chances of success, I’d like you to consider it. If there is a better method than what I’ve suggested, I will willingly step back.”

He had lost. Yuder realized that there was no way for him to win against the well-prepared argument of Kishiar.

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As he had said, Kishiar possessed a power that was effective even against invisible forces, a fact Yuder had experienced firsthand. Moreover, the potential of this power seemed to increase in such circumstances. If they could combine their strengths as they had done yesterday and today, and if that strength could also be applied to Emperor Keilusa… the chances of success would become exceedingly high.

Although he acknowledged the rationality of Kishiar's words, emotionally it wasn't easy for Yuder to give a quick response.

Kishiar quietly stared at him, as if willing to wait for his answer indefinitely.

Gone were the worry and pain that Kishiar had shown on his face last night. What could Yuder say when confronted by eyes filled with unwavering confidence, trust, and resolve? Eventually, he let out a slow sigh.

"…I can't be sure that His Majesty will heed your words, but for now, I understand."

"Good. It's naturally my responsibility to persuade His Majesty. Don't worry."

With a joyful face, Kishiar hugged Yuder.

"Thank you for giving me the chance to help."

"…"

Yuder closed his eyes, feeling the heartbeat pulsating through their touching skins.

“Let’s have a good meal tonight then. Maxia, the chef at the Sun Palace, is exceptionally skilled at creating special desserts. You can look forward to that.”

Changing the mood, Kishiar stood up with renewed vigor, turning to find his pen. Yuder watched as he finished composing his message and sent it off via a courier pigeon. Then, Yuder finally spoke softly.

“Commander.”

“Hm?”

Perhaps anticipating a complaint from Yuder, Kishiar turned around with a teasing smile. But Yuder had no intention of adding anything more to his earlier decision.

“This endeavor, whether I opposed it or not, is not a result of any ‘opportunity’ I have given. It is an achievement of your abilities and your efforts for His Majesty the Emperor. So please, think of it that way.”

To say that Kishiar had achieved this through mere means would not be right. This was not a matter of choice; it was the result Kishiar had gained based on his own capabilities.

For a moment, the man looked blankly at Yuder, not even blinking. His face then turned serious, a blend of multiple emotions.

“…That’s problematic.”

“What?”

“I thought I had lost everything, but it seems I still had something left to lose.”

Before Yuder could fully understand what he meant, Kishiar stepped closer and kissed him deeply.

…

Up until the moment he summoned Kishiar, the Emperor’s mind had been unusually at peace. He had sent his steward to the secret passage through which his brother could enter the Sun Palace and had instructed Maxia, the chef of the palace, to prepare a formal dinner.

When Kishiar responded that he would come with his assistant, the Emperor was not surprised. He remembered the days when he recognized the talent of his then-subordinate Nathan Zuckerman and took him everywhere, treating him like a child playing at being a leader.

‘And I also have quite a few questions about that man.’

Yuder Aile, who had been appointed as the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry, had recently distinguished himself in the western front. He had single-handedly dealt with a massive monster, and Kishiar had gone against his usual character to make all kinds of excuses just to treat and protect his assistant.

After crossing into Tainu, a somewhat tremendous speculation had arisen between Kishiar and him. The Emperor considered it a part of another noble family’s scheming, but couldn’t help but think it extraordinary.

Indeed, it was extraordinary. All the affairs involving Yuder Aile and Kishiar seemed extremely rare and mysterious in the Emperor’s eyes.

For that reason, during the welcoming ceremony, he had discreetly examined the Cavalry but could deduce nothing more than the black-haired young man who alighted from the carriage with

Kishiar was likely Yuder Aile. His brief memory from after their previous mission to recover the Red Stone was hardly sufficient to even recognize someone's face.

In any case, he had intended to make proper time to meet the person responsible for the recent accomplishments. It wouldn't be bad if Kishiar brought him along first.

'I trust Kishiar's judgment of people, but there's always an 'if',' he thought.

The Emperor felt a mix of relief and bitterness that he could meet the person who had brought about his brother's new changes while he still had the strength to move himself.

And then, just a few hours later, that sentiment completely flipped.

"Your Majesty, I've been waiting."

Yuder descended from a carriage disguised as a simple cart. They were greeted by the Emperor's chief steward, whom they had met once after the Red Stone recovery mission.

The carriage they had arrived in was sent by the Emperor. It didn't travel directly from the 7th district where the Cavalry was stationed to the 1st, but instead followed a secret passage located in the 3rd district leading to the imperial palace. Though it looked like an ordinary road, it would divert back to the original path if not traversed correctly. Yuder had to put in some effort not to show the strange feeling he had while passing through the secret passage he had used countless times in his previous life.

Kishiar greeted the chief steward with a light smile.

"Likewise, Yuliver. How is His Majesty?"

“He’s already waiting for you.”

“Very well, let’s go. Ah, before that… Though we’ve met before, let’s introduce ourselves anew since this is a personal occasion. Yuder, this is Chief Steward Yuliver, who has been close to His Majesty since before his ascension. Yuliver, this is my assistant, Yuder Aile. You’ll probably see a lot of him, so remember him well.”

The old man with impeccably groomed white hair scanned Yuder. It was an incredibly brief moment, but his gaze was so fast and sharp that it stung.

‘I thought so before, but he’s really not someone to be taken lightly,’ Yuder thought, maintaining a placid expression. The chief steward soon bowed his head respectfully, as if he hadn’t scrutinized Yuder at all.

“It is an honor to meet the hero of the Great Sarain Forest, Sir Aile. I am Yuliver Ark, the chief steward to His Majesty the Emperor.”

“I am Yuder Aile of the cavalry.”

The last time Yuder was here after the Red Stone recovery mission, the chief steward had not disclosed his official role and had simply guided them without much interaction, disappearing afterward. He must have considered them people he would never meet again.

But now Yuder had encountered him again, this time through Kishiar. Yuliver even subtly indicated that he already knew about Yuder by including the word “hero of the Great Sarain Forest” in his greeting.

What Yuder felt from this was a slight sense of caution, and more subtly, a touch of goodwill.

‘His Majesty the Emperor probably views me the same way,’ thought Yuder.

It’s common for subordinates to reflect the thoughts of their superiors. This realization made him acutely aware of the changes between the past and present.

Kishiar confidently followed the Chief Steward into the palace, choosing only passageways where no one was visible. Eventually, the Chief Steward, as if knowing exactly where to go, stopped in front of a door and knocked politely.

The door soon opened, revealing the room inside.

“Come in.”

The space looked more like a library than a dining room. The sight of a dining table covered with a flowered tablecloth placed in the middle of bookshelves was quite peculiar.

The Emperor sat at the head of the table. He looked much more gaunt and tired than when Yuder had seen him at the welcoming ceremony. It was obvious at a glance that he wasn’t well, making him wonder how he hid it during the ceremony.

The Chief Steward naturally approached the Emperor, bowed his head, and stood behind a chair. There were other attendants and maids to help with the meal, but their number was far less than what one would expect in an ordinary noble household during a meal.

For the Emperor’s dining area, it felt surprisingly modest, even to the point of loneliness. Yet, Kishiar approached without any sign of surprise and greeted the seated Emperor.

“Your Majesty, as I’ve already informed you in my letter, this is my assistant, Yuder Aile.”

“Yuder Aile of the Cavalry, at Your Majesty’s service.”

Yuder immediately knelt on one knee and bowed deeply.

“You may raise your head. Please, take a seat.”

The Emperor spoke softly, then looked at Yuder intently, saying, “We’ve met before, Sir Aile. Seeing you now, I remember.”

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The tone of Emperor Keilusa was incomparably softer than when they had first met. Setting aside the formal language that he had to employ as an Emperor, his voice seemed surprisingly similar to Kishiar's.

"To meet the hero of the Great Sarain Forest in such an informal setting might not be appropriate, but I assume you didn't anticipate the nature of this occasion when you accepted the invitation. This is merely a meal with my one and only younger brother, so feel free not to worry too much."

Interpreting his words, it seemed as if he was saying that he understood Yuder Aile hadn't come here willingly. Even if Yuder didn't adhere to the complex protocols of the imperial palace, he would be lenient.

'So, family really is family. Seeing how he guesses Kishiar's actions without a single explanation…'

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Yuder murmured appreciatively, prompting Kishiar to make a faintly displeased face as he grumbled,

"Your Majesty, that's a bit much. I distinctly remember properly explaining the nature of this meeting to both you and my assistant."

"I'm sure you explained. Your subordinate, who always looks so troubled when he comes here, would have heard your explanation as well. Is it not the same now as it was then, making things difficult even when you know the people around you?"

"Ha, if you say that, my assistant might get the wrong idea."

“Calling a misunderstanding what one thinks upon hearing the truth seems inappropriate.”

Kishiar, who stood in front of the Emperor, felt genuinely like a younger sibling in the presence of his older brother. Observing Emperor Keilusa, who wore glasses and had a scholarly, delicate face that displayed articulate mastery over language, Yuder quietly revised his evaluation of the man upwards.

He had already suspected that Emperor Keilusa had considerable skill in manipulating his environment through written and spoken words. But seeing him interact with Kishiar, this was clearly not merely ‘considerable.’

Kishiar, who was not easily bested in verbal engagements, seemed in no way inferior to his blood relative.

As the seemingly similar yet different brothers conversed, the door at the rear opened, and trays of food were gradually placed on the table. Seeing the simple yet elegant dishes made with seasonal ingredients, Yuder was reminded of the imperial cuisine he had experienced under Emperor Katchian.

The food he had seen then had been uniformly large, flashy, and seasoned lavishly with expensive spices. Despite the increasing scarcity of ingredients due to ongoing climatic anomalies and disasters, Emperor Katchian had never cut corners. His extravagant imperial cuisine had quickly become symbolic of both him and the then Orr Empire.

It was astonishing how the same dish could be so different depending on who the Emperor ordering it was.

The food before him seemed to symbolize Emperor Keilusa himself, reinforcing Yuder’s resolve concerning his treatment and choices. Coming here to see the Emperor’s private side first was clearly a wise decision.

“Now, let us begin the meal. As this is Sir Aile’s first meal here, let me call for a servant to assist you…”

Even the Emperor’s meals, however simple, were bound by a set of rather intricate protocols. Anticipating that Yuder might not be familiar with these, the Emperor was about to call one of the attendants standing behind him.

It was considerate of him, but the problem was that Yuder had already internalized most of the palace etiquette.

‘How much should I pretend not to know in order to appear adequately normal without being off-putting?’

Before coming here, he hadn’t given it much thought, but now he realized it was a surprisingly difficult task.

As Yuder was mentally calculating, his eyebrows subtly knit together. At that moment, Kishiar raised his hand.

“That’s taken care of. Since he came with me, I’ll instruct him. Your Majesty, please eat at ease.”

Unexpectedly, both Emperor Keilusa and Yuder turned their gaze towards Kishiar at the same time.

“…Wouldn’t that make Sir Aile even more uncomfortable?”

“What are you talking about? From the perspective of someone who is here for the first time, isn’t it more comfortable to be guided by someone you see every day? Right, Yuder?”

Before Kishiar’s radiant smile, Yuder fell silent. It was clear that Kishiar had quickly picked up on his discomfort.

“…I’m fine either way.”

“Very well.”

Upon hearing his younger brother’s audacious answer, the Emperor momentarily adjusted his glasses, as if pressing on his forehead. “Do as you please,” he finally said, lifting his spoon. His ability to discern what could be discussed further and what couldn’t was a testament to his profound wisdom. He clearly knew Kishiar La Orr well.

With a mischievous smile, Kishiar unfolded the neatly folded white cloths in front of him. Commoners often don’t use any cloth when eating, but nobles always use one. It served to protect their clothes from food stains, or to wipe their mouths after eating.

However, in the Emperor’s dining setting, three cloths were used.

The first cloth went on his lap, the second was tucked between the neck of his top to cover his chest, and the last was placed on the side most frequently used by his hand. This was to wipe his hand intermittently or serve as a backup in case the other two cloths got dirty.

Without needing explanation, Kishiar moved precisely so that his actions were evident. Yuder discreetly followed his lead but a tad slower.

Between the appetizers and the main course, there was a rule to dampen a cloth with water to wipe one’s hands. The posture and sequence when using forks, spoons, and knives were also carried out in almost the same manner.

Initially, the Emperor watched Yuder carefully a few times, but when he saw that Yuder was adeptly following Kishiar’s lead, he stopped looking and focused on his meal. Yuder noticed that the food placed in front of the Emperor was significantly less in quantity and made from softer ingredients compared to his own. Even though he spoke as if he wasn’t that ill, it was apparent that he was in a condition where even eating was burdensome.

“Do you have any idea why I summoned you today?”

During the meal, the Emperor directed his words to Kishiar. It seemed like the real conversation was about to begin.

“Well, I understand it’s not to revoke the palace entry prohibition. You were going to conclude the matter of last night’s incident with a letter, weren’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right. Despite the surprising news that one more imperial sword mark has appeared, the likes of Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince have been unusually quiet. Whenever they are this quiet, noisy events usually follow. That’s what worries me, and that’s why I wish to borrow your perspective.”

“So, you’ve changed your mind about me not getting involved, it seems.”

Despite the snide and cunning reply, suggesting that the Emperor had changed his mind based on last night’s events, the Emperor showed no particular reaction. Setting down the knife and fork he was holding, he calmly wiped his lips and responded.

“To be precise, it’s not really a job. With the upcoming Cavalry award ceremony at the palace, many people are busy preparing, tailoring new outfits and buying jewels. I’m merely asking you to take a look around while you prepare as well.”

“It seems the ones actually receiving the awards are rather quiet, while those who won’t are even busier.”

“Very busy, indeed. So much so that proper reports aren’t coming in, despite unidentified tailors and jewel merchants flocking to the palace where the Crown Prince resides.”

At that, Kishiar momentarily paused in cutting his meat.

“I see. The palace has been unusually quiet for a while now.”

A sharp smile flickered in the eyes gazing at the Emperor. Yuder caught on that Kishiar likely had some idea about this roundabout information the Emperor had revealed.

“Among the rumors I’ve heard from outside, there’s talk that these new tailors and jewel merchants are not what they seem. They are said to have been gaining a reputation for effectively treating troublesome ailments like migraines, ailments that even divine powers can’t cure.”

“If that’s true, Duke Diarca would be extremely interested in such people. Is the Crown Prince also attending the party?”

“Yes, he sent word yesterday that he would attend.”

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“Good news indeed. I’m exceptionally pleased as the Commander of the Cavalry that there’s so much interest in this event for our Cavalry,” Kishiar said with a bright smile. Just by looking at his face, one would think he was genuinely delighted to hear about the participation of Crown Prince Katchian at the party.

But everyone in the room knew that wasn’t the case.

“Considering I planned to finalize preparations for the party attendance before this break is over, I’ll certainly take note of your guidance,” Kishiar continued.

“Looking forward to it.”

“I’ll be visiting Karl Lorwick Street in the Fourth Wall District tomorrow, it’s been a while.”

A neatly wrapped-up conversation. The Emperor, pleased with the response, took a few more spoonfuls of his meal—a delicately cooked mixture of vegetables, mushrooms, and soaked rice. This time, his gaze turned to Yuder, who had been quietly listening so far.

“Well… the real stars of the upcoming party are the likes of Sir Aile and such, and here I’ve started off with something boring.”

“Not at all.”

“I’ve heard impressive accounts of Sir Aile’s exploits in the West. It’s said you can manipulate multiple elements at once, is that true?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Remarkable. Has this been the case from the beginning?”

Yuder paused before answering. He had lied when he first joined the Cavalry, saying he could only use two elements and that he could only channel them through his sword. Kishiar's gaze next to him was distracting.

Even though he knew Kishiar wouldn't add anything to whatever he said, that very fact made him more self-conscious.

"I gained the ability to use my power properly after I joined the Cavalry," Yuder finally answered, neither completely truthful nor entirely false.

"I see. Was it difficult undertaking missions in the West? I heard you were seriously injured and was concerned."

"Thanks to your concern, I've fully recovered."

The Emperor seemed eager to hear more details about how Yuder had managed to face the giant Pethuamet alone. Yuder answered, incorporating stories about other Cavalry members and those who had assisted at that time, so as not to make it sound like his own solitary accomplishment.

However, an unaccounted-for variable interfered: Kishiar.

"I'd like to add a little to that part. While it's true that others helped on the path to defeating that giant monster, the person who first suggested the idea was also my assistant."

"I see."

"…But it wouldn't have been possible without the cooperation from others, so we can't overlook that," Yuder said.

"Indeed. Nor can we overlook the fact that they later attempted to siphon off some smaller monsters for experimentation."

“Ah, I already encountered that part in the reports.”

The Emperor nodded, recalling the incident. Kishiar grinned broadly. When Yuder silently stared at him, Kishiar, sensing his gaze, tilted his head with a casual shrug.

His face clearly communicated that there was no issue.

‘I really can’t discuss anything related to that time.’

Every word spoken drew out a host of comments about the Western Mage Union’s mistakes, and even details about the injuries Yuder had sustained. Despite not having witnessed Yuder’s actions against the monster, Kishiar added incredibly detailed descriptions, saying, “I only heard about this, but…” His embellishments were so vivid, they could have come straight out of a hero’s tale.

Kishiar had thought he understood quite well the extent to which Yuder regretted the events that had unfolded, but now it seemed his understanding had been lacking.

If things continued this way, it seemed inevitable that Emperor Keilusa would come to believe that Yuder Aile had singlehandedly managed everything from start to finish, and had suffered all the injuries alone. Therefore, he hurriedly addressed Kishiar.

“Commander, I appreciate your high regard for me, but the question from His Majesty was about how I captured the monster. I believe it’s only appropriate to answer accordingly. It’s a fact that I moved with the help of others.”

“True. I never said you were wrong. I just wanted to make clear that you were my assistant from beginning to end. Was there any falsehood in what I said?”

“…”

The issue wasn't whether there was falsehood or not, but that such statements could induce a biased perception in the listener. Yuder had no intention of appearing as if he alone was capable. Maybe in his naive and ignorant past life, he would have felt entitled to all the recognition, but not now.

He had realized, after dedicating a lifetime to it, that the spotlight required its own form of sacrifice. A nail that sticks out gets hammered down, and in the process, one often overlooks what's truly important.

Yuder was more content with his current life than his past life filled with wealth and honor. He had no wish to break that satisfaction by drawing more attention.

As he hesitated over what else to say to the brazenly smiling face before him, a faint sound of laughter came from his side. Turning his head, he saw Emperor Keilusa covering his mouth with a fist and chuckling.

Considering that Kishiar had always maintained a tireless and composed expression, Yuder was somewhat surprised.

"Before meeting Sir Aile, I had an impression based solely on reports. Reality is quite different."

"I apologize for raising my voice in your presence, Your Majesty."

"What's there for my assistant to apologize for? If apologies are necessary, I should be the one to offer them. Although I'm sure His Majesty wouldn't find it necessary."

"Yes, it's not necessary."

At the Emperor's quick reply, Kishiar glanced at Yuder as if he had expected as much. The Emperor, having stifled his laughter, sighed and spoke.

“Sir Aile seems unusually humble. You’ve achieved something great, yet you don’t wish to come to the forefront. At the same time, you don’t hesitate to speak candidly to the Commander; you deserve to be called audacious as well.”

“I’m unworthy of such praise. As I’ve just mentioned, I didn’t accomplish this alone…”

“But if you weren’t there, that monster would not have been captured so easily.”

The Emperor cut off Yuder’s words and stated flatly.

“I don’t think we were able to catch the monster quickly because it was weak or insignificant. We could do it because your judgment and abilities are that remarkable. Don’t undervalue what you’ve done.”

It was terrifying how similar the words were to what Kishiar, his kin, might say.

“While it’s true that everyone contributed to achieving this, it’s also good to receive proper recognition for what you’ve done. I was a bit concerned that the reward I would offer might seem too small, but it looks like there’s no need to worry about that.”

“Excuse me?”

At Yuder’s question, another faint smile crossed Emperor Keilusa’s face.

“Your Majesty, would it be appropriate to bring in dessert now that the meal has concluded?”

Before Yuder could ask anything further, one of the attendants cautiously interjected. It was someone who had been listening intently to the ‘great tale of Yuder Aile’s monster handling’, feigning

indifference but clearly intrigued. Emperor Keilusa glanced at Yuder and Kishiar with a noticeably invigorated voice.

“I have no plans to eat more, what about you? Shall we bring in dessert? The food seems to have… suited your palate. Fortunately.”

The Emperor, about to ask if the food had suited them, switched his words upon seeing Yuder’s empty plate.

“…Yes.”

“I was also thinking that the fish dish was quite good. The finishing butter sauce had a smooth, slightly sweet aftertaste. If you want more, just say so.”

Kishiar interjected from the side. Yuder shook his head quietly.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Is that so? Then I’ll just order one more portion for myself. Apologies to Your Majesty, but I’ll bring in dessert after I eat a little more.”

Kishiar signaled to an attendant to bring in more food. When the dish arrived, it wasn’t Kishiar who ate it.

Saying that he was full after the time that passed, he naturally passed the dish, a steamed white-fleshed fish flavored with butter sauce and lemon, to his assistant. In no time, it became Yuder’s share.

“…”

Once again, the sound of the Emperor exhaling softly could be heard. Yet, the smile on Kishiar’s face remained unchanged.

“Kishiar.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“It seems you’re quite pleased with your new assistant.”

“He is indeed someone to be pleased about.”

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It was a response without a moment’s hesitation.

“Simply saying that I like him is not enough. What I have gained since meeting him is something I could never exchange for anything else.”

The choice of words was awkwardly intimate, especially to say in the presence of the person in question. Yuder was unsure how to react and instead just looked down at his plate.

Compliments were familiar to him. He had lived his life with unparalleled abilities, so it was only natural. Even those who disliked Yuder had to grind their teeth while acknowledging his skills. And the praises he received after each successful mission had become so frequent that they hardly moved him anymore. Even Emperor Katchian had consistently praised Yuder’s abilities as the Empire’s most valuable jewel in the presence of foreign envoys.

But the words that flowed from Kishiar’s mouth felt entirely different, even if they were also compliments. Perhaps it felt this way because he had never heard Kishiar of his past life say anything like this about him to anyone else.

Was there always such a difference between praise heard directly and praise conveyed through others?

Yuder kept moving his knife and fork, enveloped in a peculiar sensation. It felt necessary for staying composed.

“Really? You’re saying things you’ve never said even when you’ve succeeded in bringing out the talents of your adjutant. While the abilities of Sir Yuder are impressive, of course…”

“I’m not saying this just because of his abilities.”

“Oh? Then what else have you gained?”

Kishiar responded without hesitation.

“I’ve gained confidence in what I’m doing, a reason to live more vividly, and an ambition that awakens my forgotten drive for challenges. And…”

Kishiar paused, smiled, and then finished.

“I’ve gained everything necessary to achieve those things, through what only he can do.”

Just as Yuder was about to make the final cut of his dish, the tip of his knife nearly slipped.

Was Kishiar planning to disclose their relationship to the Emperor right here?

The Emperor slowly set down his teacup, which he had been holding to his lips. His gaze shifted from the swaying tea to look at the two men beyond his glasses.

“Everything, you say.”

The Emperor’s voice was low, and his expression seemed oddly mysterious for a moment. But then he turned his head, as if it had been a mere illusion.

“Fine. It seems that Sir Yuder has finished his meal. Bring the dessert and let everyone else leave. I would like to speak more comfortably with Duke Peletta and Sir Yuder.”

“Yes.”

At the Emperor’s command for dessert and for the attendants to leave, everyone moved swiftly. Soon, all that remained were two plates of dessert, a new cup of tea for the Emperor, and only one attendant.

Once out of public view, the Emperor called Kishiar with a clearer voice than before.

“Kishiar.”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t bring Sir Yuder here today just for a casual meeting, did you? Am I correct?”

“You are.”

“Then please, state your purpose. If you keep praising him, rumors that are already spreading in the West could become awkward misunderstandings that are taken as fact. Are you aware that you’re not the only one involved in these rumors?”

At the words “awkward misunderstanding,” Yuder’s fingertips twitched for a moment.

Sometimes, a word thrown out unexpectedly can hit the mark.

When they were in Tainu, pretending to be lovers had been an act. But doing the same now would no longer be just a performance. As thoughts of what had transpired since the start of the holiday rushed through his mind, a sudden chill ran down his spine.

When Yuder had rushed into the Commander’s room, determined to accept all aspects of Kishiar, he had sensed that everything would change from then on. However, he had never considered that their relationship might be revealed to Emperor Keilusa right from the start.

Only then did Yuder fully realize that this meeting was not only a chance to familiarize themselves before therapy; it was also an occasion to meet the family of someone with whom he had intimately shared his body and soul.

Just moments ago, he had seen Keilusa as the Emperor of the Empire first and foremost, feeling a certain distance. Now, he saw him completely as Kishiar's 'brother.'

Whether or not he sensed Yuder's mounting tension, Kishiar's face remained bright and cheerful.

"Of course, I am aware. I am a bit disappointed that you find my heartfelt words awkward."

"This is no joke."

"I'm not joking either. I've been thinking that after returning from the West, I should not leave the rumor unaddressed for too long. In fact, if it spreads more, I'd gladly welcome it."

The Emperor's usually calm eyebrows twitched.

"You have no intention to suppress this, then?"

"Correct."

"I really can't fathom what you're thinking."

"What could I be thinking? Certainly, I plan on doing nothing that would harm His Majesty, the Empire, or Yuder."

Emperor Keilusa touched his temple. Behind those red eyes, identical to Kishiar's, a myriad of thoughts seemed to race by.

"Sir Aile, are you aware of this as well?"

The Emperor’s arrow was aimed at Yuder. The tone of his voice hinted that he might take Yuder’s side if he said no. Although Yuder, like the Emperor, was hearing this for the first time, he did not feel as disconcerted.

All the tension that had been building up melted away the moment he met Kishiar’s red eyes over the plate of dessert.

“No, but I am fine with it.”

“Fine? Is that your sincere sentiment?”

The rumors stemming from their pretend relationship in the West were no longer a subject of anger or fear for Yuder. He had long since prepared himself for the repercussions once they returned to the capital.

But Kishiar—his intense gaze told Yuder that he had no intention of simply letting the rumors die down.

So Yuder was not worried.

“Perhaps the Commander wishes to use the rumors to raise awareness about the treatment of the Awakeners… Am I correct?”

“Your Majesty, look how wise my assistant is.”

“Just answer the question.”

The Emperor sighed shortly after hearing Kishiar’s joke.

“Whether the Commander wishes to suppress the rumor or make further use of it, I am committed to supporting him until the end. But I do appreciate your concern, Your Majesty.”

“…”

Kishiar smiled at Yuder. The Emperor remained silent for a long time. Yuder sensed that the Emperor's gaze was repeatedly shifting between him and Kishiar.

"Fine. Since that is what you think, Sir Aile, I have already promised to give all authority over matters concerning the Awakeners to Duke Peletta, so I have no room to say otherwise. However…"

"…"

The Emperor's gaze lingered unusually long on Kishiar after breaking off his sentence.

"Kishiar."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Is that rumor from the west… No, never mind. Let's leave that subject."

"Yes."

"Now, speak of your true purpose."

The chief attendant quietly poured more warm tea into the teacup, sensing the weariness in Emperor Keilusa's voice. The atmosphere suggested that no more shocking revelations were expected.

Then, with a single sentence, Kishiar froze the deep fatigue of the Emperor in place.

"I believe Your Majesty has some idea through what I've already said, but I've come here so that you might gain what I have gained from Yuder."

"Certainty, zeal, challenge—are these what you're referring to?"

Upon hearing Emperor Keilusa's muttered confirmation, Kishiar nodded his head.

"Yes. No one knows better than Your Majesty what is needed now."

All that was needed to do something was one thing.

A healthy body that could move at will, and a sound vessel to hold it.

As if Yuder understood the unspoken words, the Emperor and the chief attendant also seemed to grasp his meaning. The chief attendant looked at him, casting off his prior composure, and Emperor Keilusa's face solidified into an inscrutable expression.

"I'm not sure if I've understood you correctly. Didn't you say Sir Aile is not specialized in such matters? How then? Moreover, does Sir Aile know about this?"

"Of course he knows, Your Majesty. I've spoken directly as I deemed it permissible."

"…"

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Standing behind Emperor Kailusa with his mouth closed, the chief attendant appeared unable to even blink.

“Your Majesty. Do you remember the gift I sent you some time ago?”

Kishiar had gifted the Emperor stone mediums imbued with the power that came from the Red Stone. In fact, a small portion of it was still tucked away in a corner of the room, inside a vase.

The Emperor’s gaze briefly drifted toward that particular vase before returning to Kishiar.

“…Of course, I remember. But it showed no effect, as you know.”

“Would we not be uncertain whether it had an effect or not until we open it?”

At those words, the Emperor’s mouth halted once more. Speaking on behalf of the Emperor, who was struggling to find the right words, was the chief attendant, who had been quietly standing by until now.

“Pardon me, Your Highness, but it sounds to me as though you are suggesting we can find out the efficacy of this gift, like opening a box to see what’s inside.”

“Your ears serve you well, Yuliver. And if Your Majesty permits, I’d like to try this with the help of my assistant.”

“… You are not satisfied with revealing this matter to an outsider, now you wish for His Majesty to be directly…”

The chief attendant, an older man, seemed to tremble slightly at the corners of his eyes. His expression indicated he was at a loss for words in the face of such audacious claims.

‘Of course, he doesn’t seem to believe me… His greater concern is likely that I know something related to the royal family’s secrets.’

Yuder surmised the emotions that the Emperor and Kishiar must be feeling based on their expressions.

“Of all the things you’ve done to surprise me, I thought the event of last night would be the most shocking in my life… Yet, not even a day has passed and you’ve overturned that notion.”

“It’s too early to declare last night as the biggest surprise of your lifetime, Your Majesty.”

“What exactly…”

The Emperor, seeming like he wanted to say more, sighed again. Although the weariness in his eyes remained, he finally nodded and spoke.

“Fine. Let’s hear it.”

Contrary to his expectation that the Emperor might refuse without even listening, he agreed to hear them out. The conversation thus far seemed to have had some influence.

“Commander, may I speak first, if you don’t mind?”

And at that point, Yuder decided to take the initiative.

While Kishiar had laid the groundwork, it was Yuder who had resolved to begin this venture. Without his words, persuading the opposition would be impossible.

“Go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

Yuder put down the dessert fork he hadn’t yet touched and calmly met the Emperor’s gaze. A dark shadow flickered across the Emperor’s face.

“Sir Aile. I don’t know how much you know about this matter, but I am… quite frankly, bewildered. Not to undermine your abilities, but this issue is…”

“Your Majesty’s concerns and questions about my sudden involvement, especially when I have only recently joined the Cavalry, are quite understandable.”

At Yuder’s composed reply, the Emperor let out a long sigh. His eyes, which had been as deep as a profound darkness, scanned Yuder with a newfound sharpness.

“Why step forward, even when acknowledging its unlikeliness?”

“Because I believe that if there’s a possibility I can be of assistance to Your Majesty, I must come forward now.”

“Assistance? In what manner?”

The Emperor’s reaction was entirely different from when he had heard that Kishiar had been helped. Emperor Kailusa looked like he had no expectations of his own condition improving.

And then Yuder slowly took off the black glove he wore on his right hand in front of them.

Upon seeing the vivid, branch-like, dark-red veins on his exposed hand, both the Emperor and the chief attendant simultaneously furrowed their brows.

“These markings appeared when I took on the mission to recover the Red Stone. The force I exerted with my hand spread throughout my body, leaving this trace. At first, I thought it was a condition that needed treatment, but eventually, I realized my body is gradually adapting to this pure power.”

Yuder explained the process he had gone through. The initial pain he felt after the power of the Red Stone invaded him, the changing thoughts after meeting Enon, the incidents when creating a medium with that power, and finally the first time he accessed Kishiar’s body to align the cycles.

Throughout Yuder’s recounting of how he utilized that power in the West and how he had gained control over it, the other three remained silent.

Yuder calmly concluded his words.

“Using this power, I can see the flow of energy within another person’s body. If it works as it did in the tests with the Commander, it may also be beneficial to Your Majesty. While I can’t make any promises, I hope you’ll grant me one opportunity to examine you.”

“…”

“I came here to tell you this.”

Even after all was said, the Emperor did not easily open his mouth. Kishiar was the first to break the heavy silence.

“Your Majesty must be aware of the Awakener power I possess. During the process of testing Yuder’s power, I realized my ability complements his very well. Wouldn’t you feel more at ease if I were to assist him?”

“Do you truly believe so, Duke Peletta?”

The Emperor’s tone shifted to a more formal one. Kishiar smiled openly and nodded.

“Yes.”

“You’ve been conducting such a risky experiment, of uncertain outcome, without informing me, and you still find it amusing?”

“Your Majesty, I ask that you trust my assistant as much as you trust me. Because of him, I was able to achieve results last night comparable to those of the First Emperor. Ever since his power touched me, I’ve felt a newfound stability in my body.”

“Duke Peletta.”

The Emperor, once again using a formal address, raised his hand to stroke his face.

“I know my body best. While God may have granted you another chance, I don’t believe I will be afforded the same luxury.”

“Your Majesty.”

“I have long considered what will happen after I’m gone. That’s been the case for many years now, and it is becoming increasingly real.”

The gravity of his words was immense.

Even Kishiar, who usually maintained his composure, lost his smile for a moment.

“Your Majesty, please do not speak so.”

“From what I’ve heard, there’s no assurance of success, and in an unlucky situation, merely attempting it could be dangerous, could it not?”

“…”

“In that case, I do not want Duke Pelleta to waste your newfound opportunity and the power of someone like Yuder, who may become a significant figure in the future, by making useless attempts. If you leave here, refrain from conducting any more ‘tests’.”

The weight of those words left a palpable impact, silencing even the eloquent Kishiar.

The Emperor was resolute. With a weary voice, he said he did not wish to continue the conversation any further, effectively cutting it off.

However, Kishiar was not one to back down so easily here.

“When I was in Peletta, who was it that told me never to give up if there was even a sliver of a chance? When I asked you to give up on me, you never agreed to do so.”

Instead of responding, the Emperor turned his head away.

“Then, naturally, I will do the same.”

Yuder could not take his eyes off Kishiar’s face, who was smiling as he looked at his blood relative.

Afterward, the Emperor left early, citing fatigue, and did not partake in the dessert. What remained were the dessert and the two men. It was clearly a breach of etiquette, but Kishiar shamelessly suggested they should go ahead and finish the dessert.

“Luckily, the lid has a magic seal, so it’s still cold. Shall we open it?”

The dessert, its full form previously hidden by the lid, was as special and impressive as Kishiar had claimed. Cinnamon-flavored

cookies as long as fingers, and ice cream topped with fruit syrup, were stacked like a round sphere.

Yuder had seen it in his previous life but had never tasted it. He had deliberately avoided it because of people who boasted that such a dish was something commoners would never get to eat. Encountering the dish once more under different circumstances felt strange.

Reading his expression, Kishiar gently asked, “Don’t you want to eat it? You don’t have to if you’re full.”

“…No. I was just observing it because it looks unique.”

What was then was then; what is now is now. Recalling how Kishiar had been looking forward to the dessert even before arriving here, the irksome memories of the past quickly faded away.

Silently, Yuder picked up a spoon and scooped some of the firmly frozen cream. The ice cream was bitterly cold as expected, but it went down smoothly, without any sense of discomfort or aversion.

“Your mouth must be cold. Let’s have some warm milk to go with it.”

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Regardless of the presence of the attendant, the expression of the man who poured the milk himself hadn't changed one bit since Emperor Keilusa had left. But just because his face remained the same, did it mean his thoughts did too?

Yuder opened his mouth quietly instead of telling him not to do it.

"Are you alright?"

"What's there to not be alright about?"

Kishiar, who skillfully poured the milk without spilling a drop, looked at the milk he had collected and responded.

"Didn't I tell you? The plan was just to introduce you and have dinner tonight. The Emperor has become familiar with your face and deemed you a valuable asset. That should be enough for now."

"…"

"The Emperor didn't leave in anger, so don't worry that I might be upset. Unless, of course, you are considering ending your attempts at treatment."

Of course not, right? Eyes filled with trust curled up gently with a smile.

Just as he had said, regardless of what Emperor Keilusa had uttered, Yuder had absolutely no intention of quietly giving up or retracting his attempt to treat him.

Yet the reason his heart felt slightly unsettled was because until just before the topic of treatment had come up, the two had looked at

each other like the best of brothers. Even without exchanging affectionate words, one could easily guess how much they cared for each other through their gazes alone.

It was an aspect of Kishiar that Yuder had never known.

It was also an expression that Kishiar, whom he had known in his previous life, had never shown.

‘More precisely, perhaps it’s something I could never have seen,’ Yuder thought as he swallowed the cold, sweet cream that wrapped around his tongue and set his spoon down.

“…Of course, I have no intention of backing down at this point. The Emperor seems to want a definitive solution, so I intend to provide one by the next time we meet.”

“Good. And don’t forget that I should have a place in that effort too.”

After finishing dessert, Kishiar naturally stood up and led Yuder outside. His strides were unhesitant, as if it didn’t matter that there was no one to guide them.

“Shouldn’t we wait until the steward arrives?”

“It’s fine. The carriage is probably still parked by the back door. We can just ride it back. They probably expect that I won’t be returning anyway.”

“…”

However, as they were heading towards the back door to escape, Kishiar suddenly stopped and shifted his gaze somewhere. The ease that had filled his face momentarily clouded, and a low murmur escaped his lips.

“I feel a familiar presence.”

Sure enough, a procession led by a noblewoman and several maids soon appeared. Yuder was pondering this unexpected encounter when the noblewoman also seemed to notice them and stopped.

With her hair, which was almost silver, elegantly coiled up, she lifted the veil that had been half-covering her face and smiled.

“Oh my, Duke Peletta. I wasn’t aware you would be here today. Has the Imperial ban on your entry been lifted already?”

“Your Highness, the Empress,” Kishiar greeted with a reciprocating smile. Yuder too bent his knee in courtesy. The Empress signaled with her hand for them to rise.

“As you said, it hasn’t been lifted yet. But I caused a small incident last night that startled His Majesty, and I received a letter as a result. So, I’ve come for a brief visit.”

“Ah, if you’re talking about last night then…”

The Empress slightly parted her lips as if she found a clue. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand, glancing around.

“My goodness, I thought as much. I figured if anyone could do it, it would be you, Duke.”

“I’m not sure whether to say I’m pleased to meet your expectations or to first admire your wisdom in immediately identifying me as the culprit.”

As Kishiar raised an eyebrow in mock contemplation, a small dimple appeared on one side of the Empress’s cheek. Her face, previously as solemn as a wet flower, finally brightened.

‘They seem…closer than I thought.’

Conversing with the Empress, Kishiar felt like a mischievous younger sibling, contrasting his formal demeanor around the Emperor. The Empress seemed equally at ease. She had previously always sat quietly, like a shadow or a statue, but now her gaze toward Kishiar was warm and vibrant.

“I came here to personally deliver flowers I’ve grown in the garden,” she said. Indeed, the maids following her held bundles of delicately wrapped flowers.

“Would you like to have some refreshments at the palace before you leave?”

“While the invitation is tempting, I fear the Emperor might finally impose a permanent ban on my entry if I accept. I have a companion with me, so let’s save it for next time.”

“Understood. You’ve brought a Cavalry member, I see?”

Only then did the Empress truly notice Yuder’s presence.

“If you’ve brought a Cavalry member, could it be the one that’s been the talk of the town lately?”

“Yes, he is Yuder Aile, my assistant. He even greeted His Majesty today.”

Kishiar responded with palpable pride, smiling at Yuder.

“As I thought. I heard he was quite young, so I had my doubts.”

“My apologies.”

Yuder bowed his head and responded dispassionately. The Empress hesitated for a moment before asking an oddly specific question.

“Since you are Aile, you must have also met His Majesty today.”

“Yes.”

“Considering the Duke’s temperament, the sudden occasion must have been difficult for you. Did you also share a meal?”

It was a question laden with implications. After a moment of silence, Yuder answered.

“Yes. As you have mentioned, it was an unexpected occasion. However, thanks to His Majesty and my superior, I experienced no difficulty and had an honorable and overwhelming opportunity. Thank you for your concern.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that you had a good time. His Majesty also seems to take a liking to you, which makes me even more curious about you. It’s a shame we don’t have more time to talk.”

She then put her veil back on.

“I should go before it gets too late. May both of you have a peaceful journey.”

Just as they were about to part ways in opposite directions, Kishiar suddenly spoke.

“The truth is, I didn’t just come here today to get scolded.”

The Empress halted.

“Do you remember the last thing I told you during the harvest festival party?”

“…”

“I came to show you the result today. His Majesty seems to think it’s too late, but I told him I don’t think so. Because the one by my

side told me so.”

The Empress turned her head once more. Yuder felt her gaze on his face, but her expression was inscrutable, concealed behind her veil aside from her tightly sealed lips.

Moments later, the Empress turned away and left. Her attendants also followed, retreating from the scene.

“What did you discuss with Her Majesty the Empress during the Harvest Festival party?”

“I briefly mentioned the situation after the retrieval of the Red Stone. I assured her that everything would work out.”

Kishiar responded softly as they walked towards their carriage.

“It seems you worry about His Majesty’s health even more than I do.”

The distance from the Dawn Palace, where the Empress resided, to the Sun Palace was considerable. Yet she had walked that far without a carriage, merely to deliver flowers and not to see the Emperor. This likely corresponded with the reason both had arrived and departed the welcoming ceremony in separate carriages. Yuder sensed this even without an explanation.

“Besides, mentioning it in advance ensures that Her Majesty will scrutinize why we visited today and perhaps support us in future endeavors, don’t you think?”

The inexplicably bitter feeling he had earlier vanished as if it had been a lie.

Yuder realized anew that the man beside him never made a careless move.

“I didn’t realize you had that in mind in such a short span of time.”

“Hmm. It was a nasty trick I could pull because I know His Majesty’s weaknesses better than anyone else in this world.”

Finally climbing into the revealed carriage, Kishiar whispered with a secretive smile.

“It’s unthinkable from the outside, but the only person who could bring down His Majesty is Her Majesty herself. Just like the only person who could bring me down is standing right in front of me.”

Yuder’s perception of the Empress had always been vague, in both this life and his previous one. But the moment she had looked at him, seemingly to indirectly inquire about the Emperor, her gaze was clearer and stronger than anyone else’s.

Emperor Keilusa’s Empress, Rosa Faria La Orr.

Even the name, long buried under layers of forgotten memories, became vivid at that moment.

“…”

“And so… considering we wrapped up this evening’s dinner well…”

As his whisper grew softer, almost inaudible, only Kishiar remained in Yuder’s field of vision.

The carriage had not yet left the palace grounds. This shouldn’t be happening.

Yet, even as he thought this, Yuder leaned his head against the hand that caressed his cheek and closed his eyes. Moments later, their lips met, and a sweet scent filled the air.

It tasted like the ice cream and cinnamon cookies they had just eaten.

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Chapter 476

“Greetings, Sir Diarca. You’re always hard at work, aren’t you?”

“…”

A middle-aged man with a gracious demeanor, his cloak thrown over his shoulders, offered his salutations to Kiolle da Diarca, who stood at the entrance of the Bright Palace. The three young men following him hastily bowed their heads in greeting.

Wearing armor that bore the insignia of the Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resided, Kiolle didn’t even bother to glance at the faces of those who greeted him. It was an obvious snub, yet the other party seemed unbothered. He stood there smiling as if he could wait forever in good spirits.

‘Damn it.’

Once again, Kiolle found himself on the losing end of an invisible battle.

Sighing, he reluctantly led the man inside. Though the Bright Palace lived up to its name with countless windows allowing abundant sunlight, it was now shrouded in darkness, the windows covered by heavy curtains despite the daytime.

They walked through the gaping darkness of the corridor and headed toward the chamber where the Crown Prince was staying. The knights guarding the door stepped aside with a salute upon seeing Kiolle’s face.

Kiolle approached the door and knocked. A moment later, the sound of a lock being undone came from within.

This was as far as Kiolle was allowed to go. He opened the door, looked down at the visitors with a furrowed brow, and spoke.

“Go in.”

“You seem to be in a rather foul mood again today, heh heh. We’ll speak again shortly.”

With a jovial tone, the man entered first, and the three following him hurriedly scurried in after him. Unlike the carefree middle-aged man, Kiolle’s demeanor suggested he was somewhat dispirited.

‘Every time I see them, they leave a bad taste in my mouth.’

Kiolle turned away, glaring at the closed door. The knights who were guarding it deliberately looked elsewhere, as if afraid their eyes might meet his.

It had been several days since he was transferred from the Imperial Knights to the Bright Palace by his father’s orders. Though he had become the closest personal guard to the Crown Prince immediately upon his arrival, Kiolle was far from pleased.

After nearly being assassinated, Crown Prince Katchian seemed to have lost some of his mental stability. To begin with, there were no mirrors in the Bright Palace. This was because Katchian would fly into a fit of rage every time he saw the ‘scar’ that supposedly marred his cheek and chin.

The prince would frequently become restless for no reason, lash out in anger, and isolate himself. It was impossible to know how to respond when he claimed the barely noticeable scar was vivid and large. His sudden bursts of profanity and refusal to eat had become almost routine.

Given the situation, Kiolle could understand why Duke Diarca had not chosen someone else to serve as the guard. However, the most

significant problem was that the Crown Prince vehemently rejected Kiolle's presence.

Whenever the Crown Prince saw Kiolle, he would run into his room without a greeting and lock the door. Each time, Kiolle was left to taste a subtle annoyance. It was hard to believe this was the same person who had once greeted Kiolle with smiles and compliments. Given the circumstances, Kiolle felt helpless and frustrated, his tongue tied because of the identity of the one he served.

Even Duke Diarca, who seldom issued harsh punishments to Kiolle, had strictly ordered that this particular matter was not to be taken lightly. This only added to Kiolle's frustration, as he couldn't discuss it openly with anyone. Some of his siblings, believing that the task Kiolle was entrusted with was of great importance, made no effort to hide their jeers whenever they encountered him. Had they known the reality, they likely would have laughed it off, saying, "Well, if that's all it is."

Externally, Kiolle carried himself as if he was perfectly content with the situation, but he truly despised it—especially guiding the unidentified commoners.

These individuals, who had gained nearly exclusive access to the Crown Prince's chamber, had begun appearing after Kiolle had become a knight escort. Although they claimed to be merchants dealing in jewels and clothing, they were actually 'healers' who had gained notoriety among the nobles.

They had caught the Duke of Diarca's eye by successfully treating the migraine headaches of Baron Durmand, a close friend of the Duke. While the Duke had always been skeptical about such mystical practices, he seemed to consider these healers as an exception.

As far as Kiolle knew, their initial fame among the nobility arose when they similarly cured a few individuals connected to the Apeto

family. The Duke tested their skills by sending them to treat others suffering from ailments similar to Baron Durmand's. When even those patients praised the healers' abilities, the Duke covertly initiated contact to see if they could treat mental disorders as well.

And that had led to this current situation.

When these unknown commoners first appeared, Kiolle felt as if the air itself had been polluted. In particular, a middle-aged man, who seemed to be their leader, infuriated Kiolle; no matter how much he glared, the man remained utterly shameless.

Yet astonishingly, after a brief and secretive conversation with them, the Crown Prince began to allow them limited visits.

The audacity! That they could freely roam areas where even Kiolle had been denied access by Duke Diarca.

As if that weren't bad enough, he couldn't discuss this disgraceful affair with anyone else, and he alone had to bring them in and escort them out.

For the first time in his life, he found orders from his father and the Crown Prince utterly repulsive. No matter how much he showed his reluctance, the Duke of Diarca was adamant.

"Of course it's distasteful, but we have no choice if they prove effective. If they don't, you are to dispose of them yourself. That's why you are there, Kiolle," the Duke coldly stated.

The Duke believed that these measures were necessary to stabilize the volatile emotions the Crown Prince held towards the Diarca family, and to administer treatment before any further deterioration of his mental state.

But how could he approve of this, when he couldn't even properly see what kind of treatment they were conducting within the Crown

Prince’s chamber?

‘Sure, the attendant who is on standby inside says it’s alright… but can I really trust that? And if something goes wrong, won’t it all fall back on me?’

Damn it. This situation was even worse than the oath laid by that commoner from the Cavalry, Yuder Aile!

While cursing inwardly, Kiolle noticed a red mark peeking out from where his arms were folded. The sight of that mark, evidence of the oath he’d shared with Yuder Aile, brought back memories of their encounter a few days ago.

That day marked a welcome ceremony held for the Cavalry returning from their duties in the west. Kiolle had little desire to attend, but had no choice when he was summoned by Duke Diarca.

As he arrived, he noted familiar nobles sitting with faces as if they were chewing on dirt. Clearly, the fact that he ultimately showed up indicated that the “incident” that had transpired was bothering everyone in various ways.

On that day, Kiolle was not as shocked by the appearance of the Emperor—who had shown himself for the first time in years—as he was by his father. Instead, he couldn’t take his eyes off Yuder Aile, who had descended from the carriage with Duke Peletta and walked proudly to the gathering.

Indeed, the audacity of Yuder Aile’s actions in the west had become widely rumored even in the capital. The extraordinary man who single-handedly severed the neck of a colossal monster, or the shameless debauchee who mingled physically with Duke Peletta daily in Tainu.

People secretly wondered which face of Yuder Aile was the real one. Some speculated that this might be a new, intriguing hobby for

the ever-curious Duke Peletta, while others disparaged Yuder as a powerful commoner who had climbed his way up by seducing the Duke.

And indeed, seeing Yuder Aile again, Kiolle felt that he didn't fit neatly into either category, yet somehow could belong to either.

The first time he'd seen him, Yuder had appeared as pallid and unpleasant as a ghost. But whatever he had eaten or done in the west, his complexion now looked exceedingly healthy. He didn't seem diminished in the least even beside Duke Peletta, who was like a monumental barrier, alluring as a nightmare that drew people's eyes toward him.

The damned man. Unbelievably healthy. Kiolle cursed internally as he watched, and as if Yuder had read his thoughts, he turned his head. For a brief moment, their eyes met. Feeling as if his inner thoughts had been exposed, Kiolle quickly averted his gaze.

When he looked back, Yuder was no longer looking at him.

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Chapter 477

“…Sir Diarca, it seems the treatment for today is all finished…”

Kiolle’s unpleasant musings were abruptly cut off by the cautious words of other knights nearby. Annoyed, he turned his head only to hear the sound of a polite knock coming from inside the Crown Prince’s chamber.

With an icy expression, he ordered the door to be opened. A middle-aged man with graying hair stepped out, smiling warmly in gratitude.

“I am always grateful for your consideration.”

“How is His Highness the Crown Prince today?”

“Much improved. He didn’t even smash the mirror when we showed it to him.”

As proof, the man held up a small wooden hand mirror he had carried with him on previous visits. Until very recently, it had been shattered into countless pieces; today, it was intact.

“His Highness has a constitution that resists external treatments, perhaps because of his inherently sturdy nature, like a lone tree standing tall. But there was a significant change today, so it seems he’ll be able to have dinner without any issues. He even listened calmly to the steward’s talk about the upcoming party.”

“…”

If this was true, it was an astonishing change in a short amount of time. The knights around him showed signs of surprise, but Kiolle only scoffed.

“Ha! We’ll see if that’s true. Anyone can talk big.”

“Of course, you’re correct.”

“Did you use the same treatment on His Highness today as before?”

“Yes, I did.”

“I can’t understand it. To me, it seems you’re just lighting candles and mumbling to yourself.”

Barely avoiding a direct insult, the middle-aged man maintained a kind smile.

“My ‘treatment’ involves neither divine power nor medicine nor magic. I light a few fragrant candles in a dark room, approach the afflicted, and murmur something as I rub their forehead or body, and engage them in conversation.”

It was hard to believe that such absurd treatment could work, yet the Crown Prince had shown actual improvement. It was unsettling.

“Of course, Sir Diarca, it may appear that way to you. But sometimes words can be a better cure than any divine power. I simply know which words can help which people.”

“Is that so? I’m very curious about these magical words.”

“If you’re curious, would you like to participate in a treatment session? His Highness might even allow it next time.”

‘Is this insignificant man mocking me now, thinking I’m too harmful even to be present during treatment?’

“…”

Kiolle swallowed the retort that had risen to his throat and shot the middle-aged man a glare before abruptly turning away and walking off. Even in his small actions, it was abundantly clear that he had no respect for the healers and loathed them intensely.

As Kiolle pushed the healers out of the palace without a word and turned to leave, one of the young men following the middle-aged man spoke up in a concerned whisper.

“Is this really okay, wise one? We came trusting the promise of Duke Diarca, but the heir of the Diarca family disdains us so… I’m worried things won’t go well. Perhaps we should even use our abilities on him, risks of being discovered notwithstanding…”

All the young people nodded in agreement at the words. However, the man called the sage simply smiled.

“Duke Diarca can do nothing to us, so don’t worry. Didn’t you see the Crown Prince today? Let’s only think about what’s best for him. That’s enough.”

Not long after the healers left, Kiolle received word that Prince Katchian had summoned him and his attendants. Meeting the Crown Prince face-to-face for the first time in quite a while since his appointment as a bodyguard, Kiolle felt a strange sensation. The prince’s complexion had darkened, yet his eyes shone a peculiar shade of red.

Was he always like this? I don’t remember him being so… unsettling when he was in high spirits. Just as Kiolle pondered this, the Crown Prince slowly opened his mouth.

“Since the healer has gone, I feel much clearer in my mind. It’s as if I’ve awakened from a nightmare. Everyone… you must have suffered a lot because of me.”

“No, Your Highness,” the attendants replied in unison. The Crown Prince, his lips slightly upturned, exhaled deeply and continued.

“We must send our thanks to Duke Diarca for aiding me. My body still feels weak, but I wish to attend the upcoming party. Could you convey my request for him to assist with the preparations?”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“Additionally, I’d like to have dinner in the dining room today. Make the arrangements.”

“Understood!”

The attendants quickly bowed, their faces filled with enthusiasm. Kiolle also saluted to indicate his compliance and exited the room.

Everything really did go as the healers had promised. Kiolle was still annoyed that he couldn’t fully trust them, but he had a message to deliver and headed straight to the Diarca estate.

Upon hearing the news Kiolle brought, Duke Diarca expressed his surprise.

“Is this true, Kiolle? The Crown Prince said this?”

“Yes.”

“Those healers really are something. To think they even managed to cure the Crown Prince…”

The nobles surrounding Duke Diarca started to murmur amongst themselves. Among them was Baron Durmand, who had been treated for migraines by the healers and had maintained contact with them ever since. He couldn’t hide his delight upon hearing the news.

“Didn’t I say so from the start? They are extraordinary people. Ha-ha. The one who cured my migraine mentioned that mental

ailments are harder to treat, but the new one seems even more skillful. They pulled it off.”

“We shouldn’t let our guards down yet,” Duke Diarca said, quickly tempering the elation.

The nobles immediately silenced themselves. There was a weight to Duke Diarca’s words that could not be taken lightly.

“Is the ‘gift’ we planned to give to the Cavalry at the upcoming party ready?”

‘Gift?’

As Kiolle felt puzzled by the unfamiliar word, a known noble nodded and replied, “Yes, there won’t be a problem.”

Duke Diarca picked up his pipe from the side, lit it, and continued to speak.

“Considering they’ve done such an outstanding job hunting monsters, we should provide a fitting ‘gift.’ Be careful not to get caught…”

At that moment, Kiolle, standing next to the Duke, suddenly flinched and looked down at his hand.

“Kiolle? What’s the matter?”

“…Nothing. May I be excused now?”

“I recall telling you earlier that you should stick around and observe what this old man is up to…”

Kiolle answered urgently.

When Duke Diarca looked closer, Kiolle did seem quite fatigued; his complexion wasn’t good. It made sense, given that he had spent

another day dealing with the commoners he so despised.

Duke Diarca clicked his tongue and nodded. “You must be tired from dealing with so many people. Go and rest.”

As Kiolle bowed his head and retreated, the nobles by the Duke’s side rushed to praise him.

“Kiolle has truly matured lately, becoming an impressive knight. Your Grace, you have nothing to worry about for the future. Haha.”

“He’s still far off. A guy who complains about how hard it is to put up with the filth.”

Though his words were dismissive, Duke Diarca’s expression was not displeased. The nobles quickly sensed this and continued to praise Kiolle to elevate the Duke’s mood.

Meanwhile, Kiolle entered his room and took a deep breath, rolling up his sleeve. The sudden sense of drowsiness and the faint pain emanating from the oath mark on his wrist were the reasons he had returned so abruptly.

From past experiences that had rapidly depleted his stamina, almost luring him into eternal sleep, he deduced that this was a warning sign for potentially violating the contract.

‘Why now? I haven’t said anything this time!’

He quickly reviewed the vows of the contract in his head. He had never revealed his deal with Yuder Aile to anyone, nor had he issued unilateral commands or insults to his father or any nobles.

Then that left only the third term.

‘Kiolle da Diarca will, within his means, assist Yuder Aile.’

“… Could it be?”

An ominous thought suddenly sprang up in Kiolle's mind, accompanied by the echo of his father's recent words.

'Considering they've done such an outstanding job hunting monsters, we should provide a fitting 'gift…"

Though he had lived a life swinging his sword as he pleased, he had a good idea of what that meant. His father was planning to send a message to the Cavalry, more precisely to Duke Peletta and the Emperor behind them. Given the hints, it seemed likely they would target the individual who had performed best in monster hunting to send their message. Normally, this would not bother Kiolle, but now that the contract was in question, he couldn't just let it slide.

'Damn it…'

A silent curse escaped his lips like a scream.

…

"Why is that, Yuder? Did someone call for you?"

"… No, I think I was mistaken."

Yuder turned his head toward Kishiar's call and walked over to him. More than halfway through their vacation, they found themselves on Karl Lorwick Street, located in the Fourth District.

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Chapter 478

In the resplendent street named after the legendary merchant Karl Lorwick, one could easily feast their eyes on the most precious and beautiful items from across the continent. Some even referred to this place as the Street of Gold and Silk.

Yuder had little interest in the glittering necklaces displayed at the jewelers or the exquisite fabric with intricate embroidery, not to mention the expensive wares imported from foreign lands that graced the signs of renowned stores. All that held his gaze was Kishiar La Orr, who was engaged in cheerful conversation with the merchants.

“Hmm. Fashion has indeed changed quite a bit while I’ve been away.”

“Yes, traditional formal wear embellished with multiple layers of fabric, embroidery, and gems has always been popular. However, lately, many people have been seeking a cleaner, brighter look—much like a white rose.”

“Adding just a touch of colored gems to such attire can actually make it more eye-catching than a dress laden with multiple colors. Take, for example, the dress worn by Baroness Cecile at Count Anteigne’s charity party held not long ago.”

The formal wear the merchant pointed out stood out from the others displayed around it. Amidst an array of flamboyant dresses created using a profusion of bold colors, this particular dress and robe were crafted entirely from different shades of white fabric, crowned by a single blue gem near the chest area, lending it an aura of majesty.

“Baroness Cecile became the talk of the event by appearing with a blue ribbon at her waist that matched the gem on her chest. She received praise for being more beautiful than anyone else at the social gathering—all with just one gem and one ribbon. And that dress was prepared by our store.”

“Excellent. You have quite the flair for fashion.”

“Your words are too kind.”

The merchants beamed and nodded at Kishiar’s compliments.

“Do you have any more similar designs you can show me?”

“Yes, of course. Please wait a moment.”

As they briefly busied themselves to present more examples of trending attire, Kishiar playfully inquired of Yuder,

“Do you remember what I said the last time there was a harvest party?”

Yuder could guess where Kishiar was going with this, based on the dress designs they were looking at, and quietly replied,

“You said that we should look forward to a new trend in formal wear that suits your taste spreading across the entire continent.”

“See? I was right, wasn’t I?”

Back then, Kishiar had radically changed the formal attire for Yuder and the rest of the cavalry unit. The use of almost exclusively white fabric in formal wear, normally a spectacle of various colors, and the absence of any gems except for buttons and embroidery of gold and silver was practically unheard of among the nobility.

Such unconventional attempts were usually met with ridicule or avoidance, but not these outfits. Amidst a sea of other formal wears,

they blended in while still maintaining a sense of luxury. Even when worn by all 300 members, they didn’t appear ridiculous in the slightest.

The dresses the merchant showed bore a striking resemblance to the ones the Cavalry had worn. It was evident to anyone that the dresses were inspired by those outfits.

“To be honest, I’m surprised. I thought no one paid any attention to our attire at that party.”

“People always notice, even if it seems like they don’t. That’s how trends start.”

If the merchants could confidently declare it a trend, it meant more than just a few were wearing it. Kishiar wasn’t surprised; even though they had not felt the influence of their attire at several western parties, he said it was only to be expected.

“All fashion trends in the Empire start from Karl Lorwick and the capital. It takes a few years for a trend that has just started here to spread throughout the Empire.”

“Is that so?”

“Here, I’ve brought more of the clothes we talked about.”

At that moment, their conversation paused as merchants appeared, carrying heavy-looking clothes and a pillar-like rack to display them. Kishiar examined the garments, all deeply influenced by the traditional cavalry uniforms, with satisfaction. He then pointed to one and said he would place an order.

“Reduce the pleat width at the back of the skirt, and remove the thin golden cloth on top. I intend to send it to the Dawn Palace, so don’t be careless in your work.”

“The Dawn Palace, you say?”

Upon hearing the name of the palace where the Empress resided, the merchants hesitated momentarily, as if they hadn’t expected it, before asking for confirmation again.

“Yes. Since I wasn’t able to prepare a gift for Her Majesty the Empress in the west, I plan to do so here. Ideally, it should be something she can wear comfortably on a regular basis. Also, create a matching hat, shoes, and socks, and send word to the Cavalry.”

“Ah…I see. Yes, you can count on us.”

Having secured the gift for the Empress, Kishiar pretended to browse for other items before he suddenly spoke again.

“Come to think of it, are all those clothes with attached notes being prepared for the upcoming party?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“There’s quite a lot. It seems I’ll have to wait a few weeks to receive the clothes I’ve ordered.”

Kishiar’s gaze briefly scanned the notes attached to the clothes.

“No, all the clothes here are in the final stages, so you won’t have to wait long. We’ll finish them as quickly as possible; don’t worry.”

“In that case, I trust you. Ah, I’d like to buy these buttons and pins right now; can you wrap them up for me?”

“Of course.”

Kishiar stepped out of the store after buying a set of silver buttons with intricate patterns and gemstone pins designed for men’s shirt cuffs. He handed them to Yuder right away.

“Here you go.”

“Didn’t I tell you that what I got from Tainu was more than enough? Why did you buy more?”

“Do you think one is enough? I’d need to buy at least ten times more to ensure that those who know me won’t find our actions today suspicious.”

“But still…”

“To be honest, I couldn’t help myself. As soon as I saw them, I thought they would suit you perfectly.”

Do you know how difficult it was to keep thinking that while we were talking? A shameless sense of delight radiated from his face like a light.

Yuder eventually sighed and accepted the items from Kishiar.

He already had so many things that he didn’t know when he’d get to use them all. Even if there was a reason for it, constantly receiving gifts alone could negatively affect the morale of the entire Cavalry. However, Kishiar wasn’t the type to act without consideration, and more importantly, he seemed genuinely happy every time he gave him something. That made it hard for him to strongly refuse.

The situation now felt different compared to when Yuder was pretending to be his lover in Tainu and was showered with gifts. Although the circumstances were similar, the atmosphere between them had changed. Their relationship had evolved, which probably explained why the same actions now felt both more delightful and more complicated.

In the course of executing the Emperor’s orders, and also in preparation for the upcoming party, they had already visited several shops on Karl Lorwick Street. Though they moved about alone,

without any attendants, their presence wasn't overly conspicuous; the street was a common place for nobles to stroll and shop for pleasure.

Of course, there were nobles who recognized Kishiar's striking appearance and paused to greet him. The merchants put in extra effort, hoping to earn a bit more of the wealthy Duke of Peletta's coin, but that was it. People simply assumed that the profligate Duke had returned to the capital to splurge once again, and they regarded Yuder, who accompanied him, as nothing more than his knight or a servant. This was possible because Yuder's face was not yet well-known to the public.

"So, what did you think of this store?" Yuder asked.

"I noted quite a few names of families related to the Diarca faction among those who've ordered clothes for the party," Kishiar said, smiling. "I thought they'd despise our local fashions, but apparently that's not the case."

Each time they entered a store, Kishiar would make an order and engage the merchants in conversation related to the upcoming party, subtly gathering information about the event's preparations and the merchants' clients. He was so adept at subtly steering the conversation that the merchants failed to realize their client information was being scrutinized.

"Now that I have a fair idea of who'll be attending, let's go find out some real details," Kishiar suggested.

"Where are you planning to go next?" Yuder inquired.

"Hmm. There's a place favored by the Diarca family for generations, for tailoring and purchases. I intend to visit there."

The place he referred to was 'Da Fiel,' a store that occupied one of the largest and most extravagant buildings on Karl Lorwick Street.

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Chapter 479

The moment they stepped into the shop entrance, which was visible from anywhere, all gazes converged on the two individuals.

Yuder never quite got used to those stares, no matter how many times he experienced them. Kishiar, on the other hand, seemed unfazed and shrugged it off with a smile.

“Welcome, Duke Peletta. Did you perchance inform us in advance of your visit? We’ve had no notice…”

A merchant hurried over, head bowed, to inquire. Although he pretended to be discreet, his words essentially amounted to a subtle complaint about their unannounced visit from such important guests.

“No, when have I ever done such a thing? Hahaha. I was just out for a walk and found myself here,” Kishiar replied with a sunny smile, unswayed by any passive-aggressive grievances.

“Is this a place where one must call ahead?”

“Well, not exactly, but it would help us to prepare for your specific needs if you did…”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. Can’t wait even if there’s something specific? That’s part of the fun too!”

Ultimately, the merchant lost this invisible battle of wills.

“Very well… What would you like to see? Our shop mainly handles bespoke tailoring and alterations, so it may be difficult to showcase ready-made garments.”

“Don’t worry about that; I’ve seen enough of those elsewhere. I’m here because of this.”

Kishiar gestured to the hem of the long coat he was wearing. The outer garment he’d chosen for today was far more extravagant than his usual casual attire. The black outer layer shimmered as if one were looking at the Milky Way, with gold embroidery and an abundance of jewels. The inner lining was a rich, deep red. The coat was long enough to almost touch his ankles, despite his towering height.

Despite the coat resembling a winter garment more often worn by ladies, it suited him remarkably well and didn’t look ridiculous in the least.

“This garment was refashioned from the winter dress of the late Empress. However, it doesn’t seem to fit quite as well as I thought it would. I was thinking of getting it further tailored for the upcoming party. Do you think you can finish it in time?”

Faced with an order far grander than anticipated, the merchant momentarily found himself at a loss for words. Yuder was also inwardly stunned.

He had just thought it was a somewhat uniquely shaped garment. Who would have guessed it was refashioned from the dress of a former Empress?

Finally regaining his composure, the merchant licked his dry lips and managed to ask with forced calm, “Firstly, could you please specify the alterations you would like, Your Grace?”

“I don’t have many requirements. Remove all the decorations attached to it, adjust the collar to be more formal, and change the lower hem’s inner lining to the same black. Keep the removed lining separate and return it.”

“You want all the jewel embellishments removed?”

“Yes. From the pearls on the collar to the sapphires on the hem—take them all off.”

“Wouldn’t that make the garment look rather bare? Even if we remove the decorations carefully, it may not be possible to erase all traces of them.”

“That’s fine. Don’t worry about it. So, can it be done, or not?”

“If you insist on these exact modifications, then yes, it could be done within a few hours.”

Though he had received a response, the merchant’s expression was far from pleased. No matter how he thought about it, he doubted the modified clothing that Kishiar wanted would be appropriate as formal party attire.

“As expected, tailors from Da Fiel are adept at using magic tools. I’ve long wanted to meet the master of this place, Shufiel. Might I have that opportunity now?”

“I apologize. Master Shufiel had an appointment this morning and is currently out.”

“Shufiel received an appointment and left? Was it a summons from Duke Diarca or Crown Prince Katchian?”

“No, it was… Baron Durmand who made the contact. If he knew His Majesty was coming, he would have rescheduled, but unfortunately, we were not aware…”

The moment the merchant mentioned Baron Durmand, his eyes darted sideways as though stung by something. Avoiding eye contact is a typical behavior exhibited by liars.

‘Baron Durmand, huh? One of the old Duke Diarca’s confidants. If Duke Diarca had summoned him, there’s no reason for him to be so jumpy. It must have been Prince Katchian.’

This gave him a clue as to what Kishiar was searching for here.

‘The master of this place was sent to Katchian by Duke Diarca. If they trust him enough to send him to assist the reclusive Crown Prince, then it’s highly likely they’ve also sent impostors disguised as tailors.’

Emperor Keilusa had subtly mentioned yesterday at dinner about fake healers infiltrating Prince Katchian’s palace. Kishiar seemed to suspect that the leads to find these people might be here.

“Well, that’s disappointing. If fixing the clothes will take just a few hours, can I wait here? My arms and legs are sore from all the wandering.”

Kishiar feigned weakness, making a similar face.

“I wish someone could massage them, it might help…”

Hearing Kishiar express a wish for the black-haired beauty to tend to him without a hint of embarrassment, the merchant, visibly startled, quickly retreated to an inner lounge.

“Pl-please follow me. I’ll show you a comfortable place to rest.”

Yuder smirked confidently, thinking that if his fellow members saw Kishiar pretending to be frail, they would have a harder time holding back their laughter than they did in Tainu.

The merchant led them to a room furnished with luxurious sofas and tables, offered them drinks, and hastily left. Although he said he would return if called, his eyes strongly suggested he hoped that wouldn’t be necessary.

“Finally, we’re alone.”

“So now I should massage you, Commander?”

“That would be nice, but we don’t have much time.”

At Yuder’s composed question, Kishiar broke into a smile.

“It seems the master here is busy preparing the Crown Prince for the party, so this is our opportunity. I’ll stall for time here; can you go catch the tails of those suspicious healers infiltrating the Crown Prince’s palace? Don’t push yourself too hard.”

He thought as much. The role Nathan Zuckerman had back in Tainu was now his to play again. Yuder nodded in agreement.

“I’ll return as soon as possible, but if a problem arises, I’ll make a loud noise to signal you.”

“No, use this instead.”

Kishiar extended one of the rings he was wearing towards Yuder.

“It’s a disposable magic item for signaling. Turn the gemstone one full rotation, and the ring I’m wearing will emit light.”

Leaving two such expensive and disposable items on his fingers spoke volumes of his wealth and audacity. Yuder slid the ring that had fit on Kishiar’s ring finger onto his middle finger, noting how loose it was. Silently, he left the room.

“I’ll be back, then.”

The hallway that led to the lounge was deserted. Though the shop was spacious, it was noticeably empty. Yuder moved quietly, looking for a place where workers might be.

‘The first floor seems mostly for customers, so the workers are probably on the second floor or in the basement.’

While mulling over these thoughts, he carefully made his way toward what he suspected was the central staircase. It was then that he locked eyes with a newly arrived customer who was slowly rounding a pillar.

Had it been anyone else, they would have passed by without a second glance. However, this customer was different. His eyes widened, his mouth dropped open, and he pointed directly at Yuder.

“You…you…! What are you doing here…?”

Yuder clicked his tongue inwardly but maintained a neutral expression outwardly. Of all the people to run into, he had to encounter Kiolle da Diarca here. His luck was not favorable.

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Chapter 480

‘Every time I encounter this guy, something always seems to go awry.’

Whenever he had personally met Kiolle, inconvenient things had happened, such as his arm being injured by Nahan, or unexpected second gender manifestations suddenly beginning. On top of that, unlike the imperial palace where Kiolle needed to be cautious, this place was as good as Diarca family territory. Even a cowardly dog could turn into a courageous lion in its own den.

‘But it doesn’t matter if I make his luck worse than mine.’

He had already been planning to investigate why Kiolle became a bodyguard for Katchian, so encountering him here might not be entirely bad. After all, there was no better way to get reliable information than asking the person directly.

“Be quiet for now. Unless you want to announce our acquaintance to everyone here.”

Upon hearing the calm reply, Kiolle closed his wide-open mouth. Looking around frantically, he seemed worried that someone might overhear. He appeared quite foolish.

Seizing the moment, Kiolle pinched the sleeve of Yuder’s shirt between his thumb and forefinger and pulled him along. They ended up in a small storeroom below the stairs. Though empty, it was spotlessly clean. Once inside, Kiolle whispered cautiously.

“Why are you really here, you Cavalry scum? There’s no way someone as poor as you should be here. Could it be… have you sensed something already?”

He seemed like he was about to say “pauper” but quickly corrected himself. Yuder felt the effects of language correction coming into play.

‘Seems like the oath’s been worth all the discomfort.’

Though trivial compared to the Red Stone’s power, every time Kiolle nearly violated their pact, some of its power transferred to Yuder, momentarily influencing him. The sensation was so slight it was barely distinguishable from the warmth of sunlight.

“True, I have no reason to be here alone. I’ve come because our Commander has business here.”

“Duke Peletta is here? Where?”

“In the waiting room.”

Kiolle, who had been rolling his eyes anxiously, finally let out a small sigh and sharpened his gaze.

“So why are you wandering around alone! Do you even know where you are?”

“It’s just a tailor’s shop, isn’t it? You’re wandering alone too, so why can’t I? Are you saying I can’t even go to the bathroom?”

“Yo—”

Grinding his teeth, Kiolle clenched his fists and asked in a restrained voice filled with fury.

“So, you’re saying you came out to go to the bathroom?”

“No.”

“Are you mocking me!”

“There’s no need to explain myself to you.”

Kiolle’s face twisted like crumpled paper. The agony of wanting to curse but not being able to was vividly visible. Deciding he had teased him enough, Yuder reached out and grabbed Kiolle’s collar. Ignoring his sputtering, he pulled him closer.

“What, what are you doing!”

“Be quiet. Now that we’ve run into each other, let’s get some questions answered.”

“I refuse!”

“Seems you’ve forgotten the third term of our oath. Shall I remind you?”

“Would’ve been more convenient if I had forgotten. Because of that ridiculous term, this time too I—”

Frustratedly shouting, Kiolle suddenly clamped his mouth shut. He avoided eye contact, his face growing terribly pale.

“This time too? What?”

“Fine, then. What do you want to ask?”

Reacting so subserviently out of the blue was practically confessing that there was something hidden behind his previous words. Yuder decided to table the idiocy for later and first fulfill his purpose.

“You seem to have been reassigned as the Crown Prince’s personal knight.”

“What about it?”

“Were you fired from your position as a high-ranking knight in the Imperial Guard?”

“Fired? It’s an official promotion! They said I was the only one fit for the job! I didn’t take it because I wanted to!”

“Ah, I see. Then you must know a lot about the place. I hear people from here frequent the Bright Palace these days. Do you know who they are?”

“…Why?”

Kiolle responded with a suspicious and foreboding look.

“I thought I’d meet them, since I’m already here.”

“Don’t lie. You’re here to dig up information on the Crown Prince’s treatment, aren’t you!”

Look at that. As expected, a little prodding and he spills information on his own.

Yuder couldn’t help but think how much faster things would be if everyone in the world was as easy as Kiolle and replied.

“Yes, you’re right. So, do you know who they are?”

“Do you plan to nefariously interfere with his treatment? Even if I’ve made a vow with you, if it harms my family—”

“If you’re saying all that, the treatment must be going quite well in your eyes. They must be highly skilled individuals. Where did they find such people?”

At Yuder’s question, Kiolle’s mouth snapped shut. After trembling his clenched jaw, Kiolle managed to answer with great difficulty.

“…No.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t ask me if those charlatan healers are good or not, because as far as I’m concerned, they’re not!”

“Charlatans?”

“What else would you call those who use neither divine power, magic, nor medical skills? I don’t believe in such superstitions!”

This was an unexpected answer.

‘Neither divine power, magic, nor medicine… But they were effective, so both the suspicious Katchian and Duke Diarca must have implicitly approved of the treatment, even assisting with the disguise.’

Then only one possibility remained.

‘Awakeners.’

“And those people aren’t here! They’ve only left their names here, I don’t know where they came from, so don’t ask about that either!”

“Hmm. Alright, too bad they’re not here.”

Of course, he didn’t find it unfortunate at all. Kiolle shivered upon seeing the suspicious and cold smile that appeared on Yuder’s lips. He forcefully removed Yuder’s hand from his collar and shouted.

“If you’re planning any mischief against the Crown Prince, stop. You may have gained some merit in the West, but don’t get too full of yourself. If you try anything, I will not let it pass! Even if it means confessing everything to my father and breaking our oath!”

“I can’t feel any sincerity, so let’s leave it at that.”

At Yuder’s comment, Kiolle shut his mouth.

“You’re not the type to jeopardize yourself by confessing just to break an oath. If you were, you would have done it by now. If you truly understood your role as the Crown Prince’s personal knight, you wouldn’t have left Bright Palace to come here. Lastly, I’m not interested in the Crown Prince, but in those healers.”

“…No. I’ve been coerced by you… That’s why until now…”

Kiolle tried to argue but soon trailed off and turned his head away. From the speed at which his spirit seemed to break, it appeared that he had some level of self-awareness about what Yuder had said.

“Why are you here today?”

Yuder asked Kiole, who hung his head with a look of injustice. He hadn’t expected a response, but a moment later, a low voice answered.

“I’m here because my father ordered me to deliver a message.”

“Why send you and not a servant? Do you often handle such menial tasks at home?”

“Don’t look down on me! I am sent only when a task is too sensitive to trust to mere servants! It’s an important job that comes with a reward!”

Kiole seemed to erupt, as if a sore spot had been touched.

“A reward?”

“Yes. A sword better than the one I’m using now! A legendary sword that you can’t even imagine!”

‘So they’re giving him a sword just for running errands to a repair shop… Something about this doesn’t smell like any ordinary tailoring

errand.’

Tailors and jewelers who were actually healers in disguise frequented the old establishment of the Diarca family. And here was Kiole, coming to deliver a message from the Duke to that very place.

Anyone who thought there was no connection between these events would be a fool.

“So, you’ve already completed this delivery errand?”

“I was waiting to make the delivery when you showed up!”

“Good timing, then. Let me see it, too.”

“What’s so good about it? Why would I let you—”

“If it’s just a tailoring errand, as you say, then there’s no harm in me looking.”

“Why do you want to see it in the first place! Ah, don’t touch! Where are you putting your hand!”

Whether Kiole struggled or not after his collar was grabbed again, Yuder effortlessly slipped his hand into the inner pocket of Kiole’s chest. Unless you were someone like Kishiar, who naturally carried all sorts of magic tools, the obvious place for noblemen to keep valuables was all too predictable.

Soon, Yuder’s fingertips brushed against a piece of paper. Without hesitation, he unfolded it and soon narrowed his eyes, quietly exhaling.

‘An order? This is a schedule, address, and the amount, all written in code.’

It was one of the code formats he had tired of using during his previous life when he was by the side of Emperor Katchian. It was

impossible not to recognize it.

“You, you shameless bastard… Was the rumor true?”

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Chapter 481

Kiolle snatched the note from Yuder’s hand and shouted. He seemed to have lost even the basic sense of caution that might prevent his voice from being heard outside.

Yuder calmly asked, committing the information he had gathered to memory, “What rumor are you talking about?”

“The rumor that you’ve been engaging in all sorts of disreputable acts with Duke Peletta in the West!”

‘Ah, that rumor.’

It was a rumor Yuder had left to spread, but he hadn’t expected Kiolle to bring it up. Still, it felt somewhat amusing to hear such an accusation from someone who didn’t even know what true dishonesty was just because he had pickpocketed a bit.

Yuder considered ignoring the statement, but instead turned his head and countered, “Well, what do you think?”

“What?”

“Whether or not I’ve engaged in any unscrupulous behavior with the Duke, what concern is it of yours?”

“What concern? You touched my body, didn’t you? Did you join the Cavalry with an interest in that sort of thing from the start? So brazenly rejecting my offer, too!”

“Enough. Listening any further will be challenging.”

The delusions and exaggerations had reached a point that was nearly impressive. As Kiolle shut his mouth, stung by the firm

response, Yuder calmly continued, “I’m not interested in anyone. I joined the Cavalry because I wanted to, and I stay by the Duke’s side because I want to. Didn’t I explain myself well enough when I rejected your laughable recruitment offer?”

“But that’s—”

“If you’re saying that my actions are disreputable, then fine, let’s go with that. It doesn’t matter what you say. And it has nothing to do with you, Kiolle.”

The icy detachment in Yuder’s voice was like an impenetrable wall that would not allow any encroachment. Kiolle found himself involuntarily frozen before erupting in a fit of inexplicable irritation, “You…you arrogant bastard! So, is it true or not!”

To think that after all this, the conversation would loop back to this point. Yuder sighed, sharing the frustration that anyone who had ever tried to educate this fool must have felt.

“Just figure it out for yourself. Haven’t you reached an age where you can do that much?”

“You, da—”

Unable to contain his anger, Kiolle swayed with sudden drowsiness and collided with the wall. Clutching his swollen temple, he gritted his teeth and shouted, “I really despise you!”

“Good to hear something I actually appreciate. It’s better than your previous aimless blustering.”

“You…you…”

“Let’s stop the uninteresting talk. Let’s continue the conversation we were having.”

Without changing his expression, Yuder shifted the topic and ignored Kiolle's red face, asking a final question.

"Kiolle, you'll be attending the upcoming party, right?"

"…What's it to you?"

"Meet me there again."

"You're planning another devilish scheme!"

"I just have a few questions to ask you, just like today. Simply cooperate."

"Talk sense! How could I, who will be attending the Crown Prince, meet you during the party? If someone were to catch us—"

"Figure out a way to slip away on your end. I'll give you an appropriate signal, so come out accordingly."

"You think I'll listen to you? You're just trying to use me to find out more about the Crown Prince's healers!"

"True. But you also think those guys are suspicious, don't you?"

At Yuder's response, Kiolle visibly flinched.

He was a guy who, unbecoming of a son from a house as noble as the Diarca Dukedom, was unable to hide his likes and dislikes.

People usually change after facing life-or-death situations, but this guy seemed immune to such transformations.

"Whether the treatment actually works or not, it's still suspicious. You can't tell me that you've completely trusted those healers on behalf of Duke Diarca, can you?"

"…"

“What if I were to investigate for you? Wouldn’t that be a welcome gesture on your part? Especially if those people turn out to be frauds.”

It was unclear how much Duke Diarca’s side understood about the true nature of the healers. Multiple variables could arise depending on whether Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince were aware of the fact, especially if they turned out to be Awakeners, as Yuder suspected.

And Kiolle was an excellent source of information to reduce those variables.

‘So, before the party begins, we should investigate these healers on our end. Based on that, I’ll try to extract more information from him. From his expression, he seems to find the idea plausible.’

Indeed, Kiolle was thinking along the lines that Yuder had precisely anticipated.

‘…If it turns out they are frauds… It does seem somewhat useful when I think about it.’

If his father and the Crown Prince were being deceived by these supposed frauds, Kiolle had a duty to expose the truth. Until now, he simply hadn’t known how to go about it.

‘But during the party, Father will also do something to the Cavalry… The true target might not be Yuder, but if my prediction is correct…’

Kiolle’s gaze wavered subtly. Yuder quickly seized the opportunity.

“What I’m saying is, let’s cooperate against a common enemy. Consider it a partnership.”

“Hold on. I haven’t agreed yet—”

“Or are you not going to?”

Dark, penetrating eyes stared at Kiolle as if to say, ‘Speak now if you wish to join the eternal sleep.’ Kiolle found himself unable to utter a word, grinding his teeth in frustration.

“Don’t wander around aimlessly like today, or act overly honest and expose our plans, until the party.”

“When have I ever done that!”

“The way you reacted when we talked about our third oath, for example. Anyone could see that you were triggered. Have you recently had second thoughts about that particular point?”

“…”

Kiolle fell silent very quickly.

“If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine. I’ll leave. Count to 30 silently before you come out.”

“W-Wait.”

Kiolle forced out a painful voice. Anticipating this, Yuder, who had pretended to walk away, turned back.

“The Cavalry member from the West who singlehandedly took down a massive monster… That was you, right?”

“It was.”

“Is it not actually someone else?…”

“I had some help, but I was the one to deliver the final blow. So, what’s your point?”

A conviction flickered through Kiolle’s mind: indeed, Yuder was a monster, even more so than the creatures he hunted. After grappling with an array of negative emotions whose names he couldn’t even fully identify, he clenched both fists and finally spoke.

“Are you really not considering joining the side of Duke Diarca?”

“No.”

“After you receive the award at this party, my father will fully recognize who you are. Just my recommendation alone would earn you favor. After joining, you’ll be treated differently. Are you really not interested?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Kiolle de Diarca.”

“Even knowing that Father will never forgive you if you stay there?!”

Kiolle, who had shouted in a sudden flare of anger, soon tasted a regret as intense as his rage, coupled with an ineffable sense of despair.

In the end, he had said it. The words had escaped him, a volatile mix of guilt towards his father and frustration with the man before him boiling over. Yet, the man who had stirred such emotions in Kiolle merely blinked a couple of times before donning a spine-chilling smile on his pallid face.

‘Aha… So that’s why you’ve been so restless. I was wondering what you were trying to say.’

Yuder grasped the underlying motives behind Kiolle’s words with just that one sentence.

“So, Duke Diarca has decided to show the Cavalry what he’s made of? Did he say he was going to make an example of

someone?”

“No, no, that’s not it.”

Kiolle’s reply lacked the usual strength in his voice.

‘So that’s why he was so uneasy. Afraid of violating the third vow. To think there’d come a day when this guy would genuinely be of help to me.’

The methods they would use were obvious. Even if no specific target had been chosen, knowing their intentions was enough to create a solution.

‘If he truly considers me a target, that would be simply splendid.’

The saying that the greatest enemy always lies within must be true; even Duke Diarca would never have imagined Kiolle would undermine his plans in this way. Delighted by the prospect of the wily old Duke faltering, Yuder wore a smile like a predator who had found satisfying prey. He brushed past Kiolle and opened the door.

“It doesn’t matter what happens. You and I will meet at the party. Just remember that.”

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Chapter 482

In the waiting room to which he had returned, Kishiar was elegantly sprawled on a sofa. He had set up a small drink table and was engaged in animated conversation with a few merchants.

“So, as I was saying, my assistant bravely dashed forth and used his power. With a mere flick of his hand, reminiscent of a butterfly’s wing flap, the cliffside crumbled and—”

Curious about the story, Yuder paused and listened. Realizing that he was the subject of the conversation, he made his presence known without hesitation. The merchants, who had been sitting politely by Kishiar’s side, shot up from their seats the moment they noticed him.

“Ah, there, there, your assistant has arrived, Your Grace!”

“…assistant?”

“Why are you so late! No, no, please have a seat!”

The merchants, as if meeting long-lost relatives, flocked to Yuder, offered handshakes, and pushed him towards Kishiar. This was a stark contrast to their initial indifference when they first met Yuder.

“Your Grace, we shall take our leave now.”

“The alterations to the garments you’ve entrusted us with will be completed soon. Please wait a little longer!”

“Oh, how time has flown. We haven’t finished our conversation yet, are you sure you can’t stay?”

“As much as it pains us not to hear your valuable words to the end, we must go now to complete our tasks. We apologize.”

“Yes, us too.”

“Very well, be on your way then.”

The merchants simultaneously bowed and retreated, disappearing as quickly as if they doubted their primary occupation.

Yuder took a seat beside the man who was smiling sweetly.

“It seems you’ve had a good time while I was away.”

“The fun starts now, for me at least.”

With a slight tilt of his head, Kishiar changed his position to rest his head on Yuder’s lap. He looked every bit the accomplished drunkard, though Yuder knew that there was no actual inebriation in those red eyes.

“Your late return suggests you’ve uncovered something.”

“Yes, I had an unexpected encounter.”

“Did someone you know come by?”

“Kiolle da Diarca was here, on a mission from Duke Diarca, no less.”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed.

“Interesting. Do tell me more.”

Yuder summarized his conversation with Kiolle. He mentioned the absence of the supposed healers infiltrating the palace, Kiolle’s intense dislike of them, the information in the Duke’s note, and

finally, the warning, or rather the non-warning, that Kiolle had given him.

After listening to it all, the first thing Kishiar asked was:

“Kiolle da Diarca issued a warning? He’s not intelligent enough for that… Could it be a double trap from their side?”

“…No.”

Had Kiolle heard that, he would have fainted all over again.

“So your certainty means you can still employ the ‘method’ you’ve used in the past to keep him quiet.”

“…”

He was right.

“Well, as I said before, I leave it to you and won’t worry about it anymore.”

Kishiar didn’t press for more details about that “method,” accepting it with a nod. His expression was no different from when they had discussed the same topic after Yuder’s earlier manifestation.

“But how did you acquire the information that was supposedly in the Duke Diarca’s note?”

“Excuse me?”

“If he had used the excuse of running an errand, the information would not have been simply written down, and the person who brought it would have obviously not known what it was about based on the current story, naturally. That’s what I’m getting at.”

Yuder hesitated for a moment, caught off guard by the unexpected question that seemed to pierce through the conversation. He had somewhat glossed over the details about the information from the note, not expecting it to be caught in such a short span of time.

Indeed, it was Kishiar who had caught it.

Feeling an admiration that felt out of place in this awkward situation, Yuder deeply exhaled.

“…I had a way to personally discern the information within it.”

He might have felt more awkward or distressed in such a situation before. Normally, giving such an answer could lead to a breakdown in trust with Yuder, or something of a similar scale.

But not now.

“Why? Did Kiolle know that you had deciphered the information?”

“No.”

“Is there a chance someone else might find out later?”

“There is none.”

After his emotionless voice flowed through the air, Yuder looked down at the man who was still lying on his lap. He stared into his face, which looked deeply contemplative, sensuous, and profoundly wise.

And the moment their eyes met, a thrilling sensation raced toward Yuder’s heart as if it had been waiting for just this.

“… I see. Understood.”

There was neither anger, doubt, nor confusion in Kishiar’s eyes.

It meant he wasn’t content with answers one might typically come up with.

As he had declared before, he was still actively thinking, striving to find the ‘answer’ himself.

Silently, simply gazing in this direction.

Yuder felt a peculiar emotion in the eyes of the man who was chasing something beyond what was visible, something true. It was a feeling that was both fiery, akin to the moment he felt the living Kishiar, and also faintly aching in his chest.

And so, Yuder suddenly decided to disclose one piece of information he had yet to share.

“Commander.”

“Hmm?”

“The reason I am so confident about Kiolle da Diarca is actually quite simple.”

His red eyes blinked slowly, as if trying to comprehend the abrupt statement.

“I have an oath pact with Kiolle da Diarca in Hartan. Unless he becomes smart enough to free himself from the oath without exposing how it came to be with the Duke of Diarca, he has to assist me. So there’s no need to worry going forward.”

“…”

“It’s not anything particularly grand.”

At first, he had kept quiet about it, thinking it would be a hassle if Kishiar knew. Then, he simply chose not to mention it because the question had never come up directly.

But now, he wanted to offer this information as a substitute for answers he couldn’t provide.

And as if understanding the implication perfectly, Kishiar finally broke into a remarkably bright smile.

“I see. So that was the secret to handling him.”

“Yes.”

“It might have been enough to just threaten him, but you went as far as making an oath. Did my assistant suffer unnecessarily?”

“No, the terms of the oath are threefold, and the burdens of compliance lie solely on him.”

Yuder silently lifted a finger and recited the three vows. First, Kiolle da Diarca must not reveal to anyone the events that took place in Hartan. Second, Kiolle da Diarca could not issue unilateral commands, duel requests, or disrespectful speech to Yuder Aile or any other person henceforth.

Lastly, the third vow, Kiolle da Diarca would assist Yuder Aile to the best of his ability.

Hearing all this, Kishiar was genuinely delighted.

“I had heard rumors that he had been growing more mature since that time, so I sort of guessed he would have done something like this. But hearing it now, it’s even more interesting than I had expected.”

“Those rumors had spread?”

“Yes. To extract such an oath from him in that situation, it’s something no one but you would have thought of. It’s very much like you, Yuder Aile.”

Smiling once more, Kishiar grasped Yuder's hand and pulled it towards him. The loose ring on his finger met the soft lips of the one who wore an identical ring.

"…Thank you. This is the best news I've heard today."

The kiss traveled from the fingertips to the palm, and finally to the wrist concealed by the sleeve. Kishiar, who pressed his lips softly to the skin others could not see, looked up at Yuder with a twinkling eye.

If it was humorous, it was a funny thing indeed; but the body that had become accustomed to touch over the past few days responded quite easily.

"Hmm… Shall we discuss the rest when we get back?"

In a place much cozier and warmer than this. His voice, already sultry, resonated even lower and more seductive than before. Though surprising every time, in this moment, neither the schemes that Duke Diarca may be plotting nor the true identity of the suspicious healers seemed important at all.

Slowly, Yuder nodded.

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Chapter 483

As the furnace crackled and blazed, Yuder’s once-hazy mind gradually cleared.

Lifting his sweat-soaked eyelids, Yuder took a deep breath, exhaling the remnants of lingering pleasure that still resided in the pit of his stomach. While this didn’t completely remove the sensation from his lower half, it definitely subdued the heat to some extent.

“Aren’t you thirsty?”

The man embracing Yuder while they lay face to face softly asked.

“…Yes.”

As he replied, a wave of tension unconsciously traveled down to his lower body. Concurrently, a snug and tingling sensation coursed from the point where they remained connected. Their hastily discarded clothes lay in a heap, thrown aside after what felt like at least three rounds, but the object between his legs felt as unyielding as ever—never once losing its vitality.

The moment he felt that sensation, his inner lips grew moist again and some part deep within him tingled with greedy yearning. His body, which had so passionately quenched its thirst only moments ago, still seemed insatiable, despite his muscles feeling lax now.

Recognizing that Yuder was experiencing this, Kishiar began to gently move while holding him closer. It wasn’t an intense movement that would make everything soaked like before; it was a leisurely motion, just enough to scratch where it itched.

“Ah…”

Swaying his hips to match the movement, Yuder thought about how much his body seemed to have changed in just a few days. The sensation was overwhelming the first time, but each subsequent experience seemed to become denser.

At first, the immense emotions and sensations felt overwhelming to the point that everything else became secondary. Now, however, he was growing accustomed to this peculiar internal sensation. His acceptance also deepened, so much so that they had been deeply connected earlier.

But now, every motion was gentle, making the sensations smoother and calmer. It felt as if he was submerged in comfortably warm water, a pleasant feeling that stimulated his lower body and back in a rhythmic pattern before fading away.

He felt like he could easily drift off to sleep in this state.

“Soon the vacation will be over,” came the voice from above him.

Yuder lifted his head. Kishiar playfully penetrated deeper as he spoke.

“For the first time in my life, I dread the end of a holiday. Even more so because I know our time for this will lessen once we return to our daily lives.”

“…”

Yuder felt no different. He had never lamented the end of a vacation or holiday in his previous life, but hearing those words now filled him with an odd sense of regret.

“After the vacation ends, this place will become chaotic again. We’ll have to deal with matters we’ve temporarily put off, and

moreover…”

Pausing briefly, Kishiar finally spoke as he lowered his hips slowly.

“We’ll find out how far we can go with this new key of change we hold. Are you okay with that?”

The key of change. Its meaning was clear, without needing to be questioned.

Kishiar was signaling to Yuder his intention to carry out the very reason he had told the Emperor he had no plans to suppress the rumors—people still knew nothing about the Awakeners, and even less about those who had manifested second gender.

It was a ridiculous affair, but after the trial notes of Bertrail Shand Apeto’s horrifying experiments had been widely disseminated, the public’s awareness of individuals with second gender had somewhat increased compared to their past lives. However, that was all it amounted to.

Those who had manifested their second gender had long been treated like a thorn in the public’s side, even in his previous life. The heat cycles they experienced, the changes in their scent, and even the objects of their affection were all difficult to reveal naturally. Within the Cavalry, where many individuals with second gender were present, such traits were accepted more openly; but outside, it was a different story altogether. Even Yuder’s power could not easily change this.

Yet, there was still an opportunity to enact change in this regard. The best way was for influential individuals to openly reveal themselves and inform the public about their natures.

And Kishiar La Orr had resolved to do precisely that.

‘Ridiculously risky,’ he thought.

No one who cared about Kishiar would welcome this. Even his fellow Cavalry comrades might not.

The pretend relationships in the West had been enjoyable because everyone knew they were false. But if this became a reality, everyone would be disconcerted. Now he had to face not only the entire Empire but also the whole continent.

Still, for the sake of future Awakeners, someone had to do it, now or later.

“Like I’ve said before, I’m okay with it,” Kishiar finally spoke.

“Even though this could be our last chance to keep this relationship just between us?”

“I never wished for that in the first place. I don’t mind if you announce it to the entire Cavalry right after the vacation ends. After all, I’ve promised to follow you wherever you go… Hmph.”

His speech broke off suddenly as a wave of pleasure swelled within him.

Pausing for a moment to catch his breath, Kishiar shifted his position, lifting one of his legs and placing it below his knee, supported by his arm. Like Yuder, his eyes, which had lost their laughter in an effort to control his pleasure, laid bare his true emotions.

“Sorry to interrupt, but could you focus a bit here?”

As the space between his legs widened, the penetration deepened instantly, making his nape tingle.

‘Ah…’

Yuder tensed his abdomen involuntarily as his head leaned back. Breathless due to the extreme depth, he felt an unparalleled pleasure.

He moved reflexively like a nimble hunter, chasing that path of pleasure ruthlessly. As his hand slipped from Kishiar's shoulder and grazed his chest, the sound of damp skin parting accelerated. Lips that repeatedly tasted his collarbone and chest area heated up the corners of his eyes. Unconsciously, a moan escaped his lips.

Soon, a large hand grabbed Yuder's sensitive part, rubbing it firmly until all thought ceased.

In the end, greedy to the last sensation, the space between his legs became wet once again shortly after.

"…"

Pleasure spread like water between the intermittently trembling connected parts, dripping down. After several such experiences, it became difficult to determine which stimulation—front or back—was greater.

He was so breathless that he couldn't speak, yet even so, he didn't want to lose sight of the man in front of him.

Yuder felt the strong fragrance emanating from Kishiar's body as he embraced him tightly, without the slightest gap between them. The manly scent enveloped him, intertwining deeply with Yuder's own aroma. The two scents had been blending for so long that they had long lost their original distinctiveness.

Despite being wrapped in a scent that was now a tangle of the two, Yuder didn't find it unpleasant.

It simply felt natural, as though they were always meant to be mixed together like this.

—-

“Ah… I wish we could rest for just one more week.”

“You’re modest. I’d go for a whole month.”

The week-long vacation granted by the Emperor and the Cavalry Commander had finally come to an end. The members, who had gathered at the training ground for the first time in a while, were warming up, shaking off the remnants of their days off.

Among them, several members wishing for additional days off showed their faces, still clearly bearing the effects of a week soaked in alcohol. Beside them, a young man with clear, shining eyes cheerfully shouted.

“We absolutely cannot take more time off! I’ve been dying to train!”

“You say that because you’re young and full of energy.”

“Yeah, I felt the same when I was your age…”

“Who was it that said they wanted to rest more? Who?”

“Yuder!”

The member who had been about to speak, quickly closed his mouth when he heard the question from Yuder, whose head suddenly popped up. With a face colder than a mid-winter wind, Yuder seemed unchanged, as if he had not been on vacation at all.

‘If anyone shows reluctance in the upcoming training, it’ll be intensified at least threefold.’

As if they read the warning in Yuder’s dark eyes, the members suddenly sprang up and started running.

The only one who seemed pleased to see Yuder was the young man, Jimmy.

“Yuder! Where were you the entire vacation? I went to look for you in your room several times but you weren’t there, so we just had fun amongst ourselves!”

“Sorry. I had some matters to attend to.”

“What matters? You should’ve taken me with you.”

“Um… it wasn’t the kind of thing to involve others in.”

While the boy tilted his head in confusion, not grasping the hidden meaning in Yuder’s words, other colleagues who were close to Yuder appeared. There was Gakane, who looked like a withered rose possibly due to a hangover; Steiber, whose complexion seemed bright, suggesting he had a pleasant time with family; and also Ever and Kanna, who greeted Yuder in unison.

“Yuder! Did you have a good rest?”

“Uh, Yuder. Oh, hello.”

Unlike the cheerful greeting from Ever, Kanna seemed to have trouble meeting Yuder’s eyes. Jimmy looked puzzled as he watched Kanna hurry away, hobbling awkwardly.

“Why did Kanna act like that? Is she unwell?”

“Who knows…”

“Gosh, it’s not the manifestation of second gender, is it?”

“That’s unlikely. If she keeps acting like this, I’ll go ask her later. Don’t worry.”

“Alright…”

“Thank you, everyone, for assembling so promptly.”

Just then, Kishiar made his appearance and began speaking, drawing the attention of all the members. Jimmy and Yuder’s conversation came to an abrupt halt.

“Did everyone have a good vacation?”

“Yes!”

“I see some faces that seem like they wanted more time off.”

“Heh heh heh…”

An awkward laughter rippled through the ranks of the Cavalry members.

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Chapter 484

“Before returning to our regular routine, there are a few matters I must inform you of.”

The atmosphere, which had been lightened by a joke, suddenly grew quiet. Kishiar scanned the faces of his attentive Cavalry members, his eyes brimming with a confidence that was incomparable to before.

“Firstly, our Cavalry has two new temporary members. Those of you who have been to the West will already be familiar with them. Additionally, we have one more person who will be working on various studies alongside our medical unit within the Cavalry. Will the three of you please step forward?”

As soon as he finished speaking, Pruelle, holding a cat in her arms, and Hellem walked out from the back door. Unlike Hellem’s relaxed face, Pruelle looked slightly tense behind his smile.

“I am the mage Hellem. Originally, I resided in Peletta, which is the territory of our Lord. I joined the Cavalry in light of our recent journey to the West.”

“My name is Pruelle Van Tain. I possess the ability to transform into other people. This one here is my younger sibling Nipollen, who can turn into a cat and usually stays in that form.”

When the members heard Pruelle’s name, a somewhat bitter smile flickered across his face.

“Yes, it’s understandable to be surprised. However, I have no intention of using this name within the Cavalry. You may simply call me Elle.”

The murmur among the members grew louder at his request to be addressed as if he were a commoner. However, the members soon quieted down, having already witnessed the case of Revlin Shand Apeto, and seemed to accept the situation.

As the initial surprise began to settle, Kishiar resumed speaking, as if waiting for that moment.

“Lord Pruelle—or rather, Elle—sought us out, inspired by Revlin. Had it not been for the genuine help he gave us in Tainu, we would not have been able to wrap up matters so smoothly.”

Kishiar objectively narrated the deeds Pruelle had done in the West. Emotion welled up among several members as they heard the tale of Nipollen, who had grown up hidden from even their parents due to an innate condition, and Pruelle, who had risked danger to aid the Cavalry in order to save his siblings.

“Nipollen prefers to stay in his cat form, as he feels more comfortable that way than as a human. However, he says that he can be fairly comfortable in front of other Awakeners, as long as he’s with his siblings. So, let’s make sure we all get along.”

“Understood!”

“Very well, the three of you may take your places.”

After the greetings, Hellem, Pruelle, and Nipollen stood beside the squadron members. Eager eyes stretched out here and there, longing to get a closer look at the small kitten cradled in Pruelle’s arms.

“Secondly, what I’d like to inform you of concerns the second round of Cavalry recruitment, set to happen soon.”

The members gasped at the news, even more shocking than the new temporary members.

“You have all shown tremendous results, deserving of your efforts and expectations. However, the truth is, with upcoming regional branches starting from the West, 300 members are not enough. Therefore, though a bit earlier than planned, we’ve decided to begin the second recruitment before the winter passes.”

“So… do you intend to recruit from each region right from the start this time?”

Steiber raised his hand and asked.

“Yes. East, West, North, South, and potentially Central as well. We plan to recruit from these five regions in total. Details on the locations and schedule for the entrance test will be confirmed and announced soon.”

“Commander, you’re not planning to personally go and select recruits from all these regions, are you?”

Kishiar grinned at the question from a member who looked slightly concerned.

“Good question. Of course, I can’t be everywhere at once. I plan to take charge of the central region, and the western region will be overseen by its local branch. The rest will be delegated to a selected few among you. Our Deputies and assistant will likely be busier as well.”

Kishiar explained the plan with an attitude that suggested he’d been preparing it for a long time.

Excluding the central and western regions, the second round recruitment tests for the Cavalry in the northern, southern, and eastern regions were slated to be managed by outstanding first round Cavalry members familiar with the respective local conditions.

Those who become examiners will conduct the primary tests for the Awakeners applying for the second round of Cavalry recruitment. Their duty would also involve bringing the selected candidates to the capital. Kishiar would then have the opportunity to assess these recruits from across the nation one last time.

“Preference will be given to those who apply first, so if you’re interested, inform the Deputies or the assistant ahead of time.”

The eyes of the members sparkled at the mention that the selected examiners, once a branch in their region is established, will have priority to apply. Also, depending on the mission’s success, they would be rewarded with bonuses and vacations. Yuder faintly smiled, feeling the burning determination all around him.

‘Anyone would want to apply after hearing such an offer, especially when they’ve just had a taste of a delightful vacation and yearn for more.’

Kishiar had likely mentioned the vacation beforehand to elicit exactly this kind of reaction. It was an astute understanding of human psychology.

“And lastly, the third point is about the party that will soon be held at the Imperial Palace.”

Kishiar shifted the atmosphere to discuss what the members had been eagerly anticipating.

“I believe you all sensed that His Majesty the Emperor is pleased with our successful mission, as he’s personally welcoming us. Originally, we would have only received honors, but this has escalated to a grand party at the palace for the same reason.”

The party would not only include members of the Cavalry but also many influential nobles from the capital. The members couldn’t contain their surprise and delight upon hearing they’d be the guests

of honor at a party in Cantameria Palace, renowned for having the most beautiful banquet hall in the Imperial Palace.

“However, there is one difference between this upcoming party and the previous Harvest Festival you’ve attended.”

Kishiar continued, smiling amid the excited atmosphere.

“This time, there will be a designated period for dancing. While I’m not sure about those who don’t intend to dance, the first dance will certainly be ours, as the party is being held in our honor.”

Silence fell. The members looked at each other, still uncertain what to make of Kishiar’s softly spoken but firm words.

“I don’t plan to restrict dance partners solely based on gender, as has been the custom.”

Another silence followed. The members cautiously met each other’s eyes. Most of them had not yet fully grasped the significance or implications of what they’d just heard.

Finally, Gakane, who hailed from a noble family traditionally inheriting their rank, raised his hand and spoke.

“Commander, are you saying that… we’re not strictly required to pair men with women according to traditional rules?”

“You’ve understood correctly.”

Only then did a buzz swell among the unit members.

“Hmm, is this really okay?”

“It might be different if we were just drinking among ourselves and dancing however we like, but we’re in the imperial palace, of all places.”

Even though they spoke thus, when it came to choosing partners, everyone would likely move according to familiar criteria. That's what they all thought.

And just at that moment, as if timing it perfectly, Kishiar opened his mouth.

"Which is why I intend to have Yuder Aile as my partner for that occasion."

"…"

The training grounds, where the atmosphere had been far from serious despite the buzz, suddenly fell silent.

The members said nothing, diligently processing the shocking statement they had just heard.

'Uh… The Commander is going to partner with Yuder?'

'Does he mean to continue the act we started in Tainu?'

'Is there a need to keep doing this here?'

Yuder maintained a quiet silence in the face of the scrutinizing gazes directed at him. His eyes were fixed solely on Kishiar, who stood at the front.

'As expected, nobody is taking it too seriously at first.'

Changing the traditional criteria for choosing a dance partner at the party to include Yuder had been Kishiar's idea even before today arrived. Seeing it as an appropriate first step to clearly convey his intentions, Yuder had nodded without a word.

Changing the standards for picking a dance partner at a mere party might seem trivial, but it was not a simple matter for those who would experience it firsthand.

Ignoring the confused gazes of the members, Yuder calmly opened his mouth.

“Yes, I look forward to it.”

In that instant, the training grounds turned upside down in utter silence.

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Chapter 485

“Yuder, do you really intend to go through with it?”

“We’re talking about the imperial palace, of all places… Could this be one of your usual jests?”

“Even if it’s under the Commander’s orders, the situation here is different than in the West…”

Yuder found himself trapped among the swarm of members who rushed to him as soon as Kishiar had left. Although they spoke in hushed voices, the atmosphere was far from quiet; with each one chiming in, their concerns accumulated like a burgeoning cloud.

The members should have been rejoicing at the news of a party, yet their faces betrayed no joy. Yuder watched them with a curious feeling, their faces worried and their chatter passionate.

Although they didn’t seem to be taking the news entirely seriously, their worried expressions were genuine.

“Yuder, if you couldn’t refuse because it was hard to say no, we’ll go with you…”

“No, I was not coerced into agreeing.”

Before the atmosphere could take a turn toward suspicion that Yuder had been pressured into his decision, he spoke up to stop any hasty conjectures.

“Do you think the Commander would force me into this as some sort of joke?”

“…”

“I accepted the offer, and that’s that. There’s no official problem since they said the standards are being changed. It’s just a dance, after all.”

“But that’s not the issue… the problem is the gossip and ridicule that you’ll have to endure!”

“Sure, Commander Kishiar is an Alpha Awakener, and you’ve emerged as an Omega, but even so… can you really do this? Like in the West, we don’t know what kind of people might show up!”

“Oh, stop bringing that up!”

Yuder was taken aback by the stronger-than-expected backlash. He had thought that by this point, out of consideration for Kishiar if nothing else, they would back off. He was wrong.

The answer lay in a facet he had not deeply considered.

During their time in Tainu, while their fake romantic drama unfolded, those in the Cavalry who had been dealing with maintaining security had grown weary of the malicious rumors and insults. Rumors and insults always circulated more when the subjects weren’t around to defend themselves.

Even if they knew the truth was different, it was deeply unpleasant for them to see one of their own—representative figures at that—being treated in such a manner. When faced with a situation that might bring back memories of those unpleasant times, their reaction was reflexive.

When a group senses an external threat, it tends to grow tighter. The Cavalry members, who had just completed a challenging mission in the West, had long since become a tight-knit family. Issues like the nuanced differences between first gender and second gender and the reason Kishiar had specifically chosen Yuder were secondary compared to the potential dishonor that Yuder might

suffer. This was yet another strange shift brought about by their fake romance.

As the voices of the excited members began to grow louder, Yuder's gaze met with familiar faces in the crowd. There was Ever, who had not entirely concealed her awkward expression, the Eldore siblings who were openly intrigued, worried Jimmy, even more worried-looking Gakane, and Kanna, who looked unsure beside him.

The moment their eyes met, Kanna clenched her fists and suddenly stepped forward.

"Hold on! Everyone, just calm down."

It was exceedingly rare for Kanna Wand, the Jung Division Deputy Commander who was normally on good terms with everyone, to take the lead like this. As the surprised crowd fell silent, Kanna spoke with an expression that seemed so tense it almost felt composed.

"Let's all just take a breath here."

"So, to summarize, the Commander has decided to change the criteria for the dance partners in this upcoming party. There's nothing we can do about it; it's already been decided. Yuder has also accepted this."

"…"

"And, Yuder, are you really okay with this?"

As she spoke, the look she gave Yuder was almost too cautious. Was it his imagination? Yuder simply nodded.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"No, but still—"

“I haven’t finished speaking.”

Kanna raised her hand, interrupting another member mid-sentence.

“I’ve never really thought deeply about this… but when I do think about it, isn’t this really a party for Awakeners? I mean, considering the Awakeners with second gender.”

“…”

“The Commander may be playful, but he has never done anything harmful to us. I believe it will be the same this time. So Yuder must have accepted it because… What I want to say is—”

“…If you want to help Yuder, rather than trying to overturn a settled decision, we should participate as the Commander suggested?”

It was Ever who spoke, taking over for Kanna, whose ears and cheeks were gradually turning red.

“Exactly! That’s what I mean. If only one pair participates in this new way, it would naturally look odd, but if several do… it would be much better.”

The Cavalry members looked at each other’s faces.

“…Is that so?”

“At first it seemed strange, but hearing it now, it makes sense. The commander said he was changing the criteria, not that he would be the only one participating in this manner.”

“Right. If Yuder can do it, so do we. We are all part of the same Cavalry!”

The same Cavalry. That invincible phrase ignited a fire in all of their hearts in an instant.

“Fine! Since it’s decided, let’s all get criticized together! We’ve slain monsters; what’s there to be scared of!”

“If I was afraid of criticism, I wouldn’t have come here to take the entrance test after hearing that I’d have to sever ties with my hometown!”

“Anyone who has manifested second gender here, raise your hands!”

“Hey, isn’t this going to be historic? Hahaha.”

Watching the group that had suddenly become passionate, Yuder remained quietly silent. He had hoped things would move in this direction, but he never expected it to happen this way.

Yet, the zealous voices saying they would take criticism so that Yuder wouldn’t have to face it alone didn’t sound bad to him, probably because he was already a part of this Cavalry.

It was a strangely unfamiliar feeling.

He turned his head and mouthed a silent thank-you to Kanna. Seeing this, Kanna, whose face was still slightly flushed, vigorously shook her head. He would have preferred a private conversation, but once again she moved away from Yuder with an awkward gesture.

‘…Does she have some kind of issue with me? I should ask her why she’s acting like this.’

Yuder turned back to the enthusiastic members and spoke.

“Everyone, one moment. If we’re done exchanging opinions about the party preparations, there’s something I’d like to say before

we move on.”

“Uh, what? What is it?”

“Are you touched by our loyalty?”

The members grinned awkwardly, anticipating thanks from the mouth of the Commander’s ever-silent assistant. However, what came from Yuder’s lips was entirely different.

“I’ve been thinking during the break, and starting today, I want to change the types and intensity of our training. I’ve already received the Commander’s permission. The new schedule is right here, and I’ll put it up now.”

Without hesitation, Yuder unfolded the neatly folded paper he had taken from inside his uniform and affixed it to the wall where the previous training schedule had been. The new training schedule was already much more densely packed than the previous one, which had hardly any empty spaces to begin with. It also included several new training exercises they had never done before.

The color drained from the faces of the members as they read it.

“Wait… Yuder! Did you forget that today is the first day back from vacation?”

“What is this? I appreciate the separate time for dance practice, but magic and magic tools response training? Magic bomb disposal? Why are we training for this stuff?”

“Anyone who went on the recent mission to the Great Sarain Forest would understand the need for such training without it needing to be said.”

At the calm response, a few people timidly nodded their heads.

“If anyone thinks this training is unnecessary, try beating me first. If you can, I’ll acknowledge it and remove it.”

“As if that would ever be possible!”

Indignant voices filled the training ground. Yuder’s lips twitched upward ever so slightly as he walked past them.

…

“Do you think all the members are convinced?”

“Yes. Kanna’s help was instrumental.”

“Good.”

Upon entering the Commander’s office, Yuder faced Kishiar, who was in his Commander uniform after a long time. Next to him was Nathan Zuckerman, who had returned after his vacation.

“Then, shall we get started on our agenda? Are you ready?”

“…”

“Nathan. Pick up the violin.”

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Chapter 486

Following Kishiar’s solemn yet playful command, Nathan Zuckerman hoisted the violin he had been holding onto his shoulder. One would not expect someone who usually wielded a sword to look at ease with a musical instrument. Yet, he appeared surprisingly stable and proficient.

Upon seeing this, Yuder looked on pensively, prompting Kishiar to break into a smile.

“Surprised? I asked Nathan to accompany me because it seemed the most convenient.”

Yuder responded with a slight nod of his head, saying nothing.

“Don’t worry about it. I taught him, so there’s no need for a lot of direction. I asked him to accompany me in practice because he plays better than most musicians, even though he doesn’t usually perform.”

“You personally taught Sir Zuckerman the violin?”

“Yes.”

“You claimed it would help with sword training?”

At this, Nathan Zuckerman, bow in hand, quietly sighed before responding. “As it turns out, he only taught me because he didn’t like practicing alone.”

“What kind of grumbling is that? Playing the violin helps build arm strength and fine-tunes the pressure you exert with your hands,” Kishiar replied, unashamedly.

In truth, Yuder was not particularly surprised that Nathan Zuckerman had come to help with the music. Something similar had happened in his past life when he was learning to dance from Kishiar. However, the atmosphere then had been far less amicable, and he had never learned why Nathan Zuckerman had been taught the violin. He hadn't had the luxury to be amazed that Nathan could play.

'And for some reason, Nathan seems less troubled now than he did then.'

Although Nathan had just found out that the man who would be his Lord's dance partner was in good health, his expression seemed surprisingly stable. His gaze, though a bit complicated, was just that and nothing more.

'Did he hear something from Kishiar before I arrived?'

"Shall we take our places then? Take off your overcoat and come this way."

Having already shed his overcoat, Kishiar stood in an empty space he had cleared by pushing aside a sofa and table. Yuder removed his overcoat and took a deep breath.

The purpose of today's gathering was not primarily for dance lessons. Kishiar had asked him if he could dance to some extent after mentioning a plan to change his dance partner at the party, to which Yuder had responded that he could do as much as was needed.

'As much as is needed, huh? I wonder what that entails.'

Kishiar hadn't asked whether Yuder had learned to dance before, from whom, or to what extent. He had simply arranged this session to gauge Yuder's 'as much as needed' level of dance.

“Traditionally, nobles prefer dancing to ‘Rancha,’ a four-beat style of music at their parties. It’s slow-paced, so many people can dance at once without creating a cacophonous atmosphere.”

Facing Yuder, Kishiar assumed a dance posture as if with an unseen partner and demonstrated a few simple steps. Even dancing alone, without music, he looked adept enough that the notion of it being ridiculous never entered one’s mind.

“But I’ve chosen a piece in the ‘Avitan’ style for our first dance. Can you guess why?”

Rancha was a dance form traditionally favored by nobles, while Avitan was a style that originated and developed among commoners.

In a time unimaginable now, but years later seemingly eternal, the popularity of Rancha would wane. The young nobles, weary of the repeated natural disasters, would find greater stimulation and pleasure in the allure of Avitan.

But for now, choosing Avitan even before such a time had come…

“Is it because of the origin of the dance? I assume it’s easier for the members to learn than Rancha.”

“That’s part of it. But the reason I choose Avitan is that it originally includes a dance form performed by two men.”

Kishiar shifted his posture. Unlike during Rancha, his arm that held an invisible partner had risen much higher. At his subtle gesture, Nathan Zuckerman lifted his bow onto the violin.

As the music started, Kishiar began to dance. His movements were much faster than before, but there was not a hint of faltering.

Yuder, who was quietly observing him, suddenly realized who the invisible partner dancing with him was.

It was himself.

“What do you think?”

The dance ended all too quickly, leaving Kishiar seemingly unfazed as he asked. Yuder responded, slower than usual.

“It’s different from the Avitan I knew.”

“Well, it’s a form danced by two men, so it would be.”

Kishiar chuckled.

“The history of Avitan is longer and broader than you think. Hundreds of years ago, the dance that became the prototype of Avitan was performed in the imperial palace. The name isn’t explicitly stated in the records, but it’s a pretty credible guess that the dance the Emperor performed in the early days of the Orr dynasty was based on this form.”

And so, Kishiar had arranged for Avitan to be performed at the imperial palace party based on such historical records.

“Anyway, Avitan is more favored in other countries right now. Even in the northern part of the Empire, unless it’s a large-scale party, Avitan is usually the dance of choice. There’s no reason for the palace to consider it taboo. Especially when we’ve been granted the first song choice.”

“…”

“So, are you up for it?”

Yuder looked at the hand extended to him with a smile.

In his past life, Kishiar had taught him both Rancha and Avitan, but only the dances for men. He had never mentioned that there was a form danced by two men.

‘I wouldn’t have bothered to learn it even if I’d known then…’

Dances between people of the same gender typically happened among commoners who had become boisterously drunk. Even then, it was just random, unstructured movements for the most part. It was unimaginable to dance such a dance at an elegant party of nobles.

“Where did you even find out that this exists?”

“When I first learned to dance, my teacher was quite the eccentric.”

Kishiar replied in a mischievous tone.

“After mastering all the female dance forms in just one day, I impressed the Emperor… well, he was the first prince back then. He was so pleased that he taught me this form as well. Apparently, it used to be danced among close friends, but it had almost disappeared, preserved only among those learning it.”

“…”

“The late Emperor and Empress were quite astounded, of course.”

His added comment was astonishing in its own right.

Although he had said he could do as much as necessary, this was unexpected. Yuder let out a small sigh as he grasped Kishiar’s hand.

“…I suppose I’ll have to learn this anew.”

Kishiar responded with a satisfied smile, having gotten the answer he wanted.

“Is that so? What a shame. Then shall we start from the beginning?”

Yuder took Kishiar’s hand and placed his other hand between his back and waist, as instructed. Kishiar assumed the same position.

Nathan Zuckerman began to play once more, following Kishiar’s eye signal.

“Fundamentally, it’s the same as the conventional Avitan. It’s just that the sensation of two people’s movements interlocking is somewhat different.”

Kishiar moved his foot, pulling Yuder’s hand. The basic steps were similar to what he had already known. The main difference was that when both moved together, many parts had to mesh equally.

If both had executed the traditional male steps at the same time, their bodies would have continually clashed. However, moving as Kishiar led and taught, those moments were surprisingly smooth. It felt like two blocks, which you wouldn’t have expected to fit, meshed incredibly well.

Moving like this, the sensual and stimulating atmosphere that the traditional Avitan held vanished, replaced by new sensations that hadn’t been there before.

This was possible because Kishiar was leading Yuder so well.

“See? It’s not as difficult as you thought, right?”

After circling the office a few times and Yuder’s movements had become somewhat smoother, Kishiar whispered in his ear.

Unconsciously, Yuder looked up at Nathan Zuckerman, who was in the midst of his performance. The dutiful knight was emotionlessly focusing only on the tip of his bow.

“…Yes. It is easier than I thought.”

“If you had only learned the male steps before, this will be a unique opportunity. Enjoy it.”

Yuder almost stumbled for a moment before asking softly,

“…Couldn’t I have also learned the female steps?”

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“…Couldn’t I have learned the female steps as well?”

“Ha-ha. Like me?”

“Yes.”

Kishiar’s eyes swirled, sensing the implied meaning behind Yuder’s words that he seemed so certain even without hearing anything other than the fact that he could dance.

“Well, I doubt that. If we dance together, you can quickly tell that much. Dancing reveals more about your partner than you’d think.”

Finishing his sentence as if singing a song, the man put force into his hands around Yuder’s waist and spun him around. The instant their bodies came into full contact, a mysterious, dizzying sensation brushed against them.

Yuder clenched his teeth to suppress the feeling and spoke again.

“So, from what you’ve seen, I’ve only learned the man’s dance… What else did you observe?”

“Hmm… It seems like you learned it quite a while ago. Or perhaps you haven’t danced much since you learned. The evidence is that you remember the basic moves well but you’re consistently a little slow in following.”

“…”

“Shall I go on?”

It was so accurate it gave Yuder chills.

But on the other hand, he was curious how far Kishiar had deduced. Raising the arm that held Kishiar's hand high, Yuder met Kishiar's scrutinizing red eyes defiantly.

"Yes."

Kishiar chuckled softly, as if he had expected this response. He immediately lifted one leg, hooking it behind Yuder's knee, and pulled, spinning their connected bodies. He then whispered into Yuder's ear while shielding him from Nathan Zuckerman's view.

"Some of your movements are strikingly similar to the way I've learned. Considering that even the same dance can differ in subtle ways depending on the teacher, it's quite an intriguing discovery."

The moment he finished speaking, their bodies completed one full rotation, returning to their original positions. The move was flawlessly executed, as if he had predicted it from the start.

Though Kishiar continued dancing as if nothing had happened, Yuder's mind was full of a baffling impact.

'… Similar movements?'

Of course they'd be similar. Yuder had learned the dance from the man in front of him.

Yet he couldn't figure out what exactly was similar, and that was the problem.

'Do I not get it? Doesn't everyone else dance like this too?'

Kishiar looked at Yuder with the eyes of someone who already knew he was correct. Confronted with this gaze, Yuder's heart pounded, and then an empty laugh escaped his lips.

“…I really don’t know, but I see.”

“Yes.”

Kishiar replied with a sly smile.

As the violin melody that had been rushing passionately toward its climax finally reached its peak and began to recede, they ended their practice and stepped back to exchange pleasantries.

“That’s enough for today. Good work, Nathan.”

Kishiar lowered his bow and complimented Nathan Zuckerman, who had managed his instrument well despite not playing for a while. Yuder also bowed his head in gratitude toward Nathan.

“Thanks to Sir Zuckerman, I was able to learn well. Thank you for your time.”

“…You’re welcome.”

Nathan Zuckerman’s gaze seemed as if he wanted to say something but didn’t; however, he quickly packed his instrument and left. Yuder watched him go and then spoke.

“Did you tell Nathan everything?”

“I guess I should say so. He’s quite perceptive, so it seemed he had figured out most of it without me even having to tell him.”

“Is that okay?”

“Seems like it.”

“It’s alright. The fact that he accepted the performance request without saying anything means he has his reasons. Don’t worry too much. If he really opposed it or disliked it, he would never have responded the way he did.”

Kishiar grumbled with a smile, as if asking how much Nathan understood about how anxious and stubborn he really was. To Yuder, Nathan Zuckerman was a knight who would accomplish any seemingly impossible task if Kishiar commanded it. However, Kishiar's assessment of Nathan's personality seemed slightly different.

"In that case… understood."

Although he replied in agreement, Yuder thought he would need to meet Nathan personally to discuss matters soon.

Dressed in his usual attire, Yuder briefly explained the day's agenda and plans to Kishiar.

"Once the morning training is complete, I plan to trace the source of the information we obtained from the letter of Duke Diarca. Therefore, please understand if I don't return until late in the afternoon."

"Are you going alone?"

"No. I think it's time to use the authority you granted me before."

Before leaving for the west, Yuder had received from Kishiar the right to choose five members to work directly under him. So far, only candidates existed, but now that he had returned to the capital, it was time to officially use that authority.

"Upon consideration, it seems necessary to train specialists within the Cavalry who can collect information. I've almost finalized the list of possible aides."

"Good. Who are you thinking of partnering with?"

"In the west, Gakane demonstrated exceptional leadership, and Finn and Hinn showed excellent abilities in infiltration and catching

the enemy off guard. Also, if it's alright to include someone from the medical unit, I'm considering Enon. I'm still contemplating the last spot."

Jimmy was also an outstanding choice in terms of ability, but he was still too young. His face might look young like the notorious Eldore siblings who boasted of being the best in the Cavalry, but he was an extremely innocent and straightforward child. He didn't seem like a good fit for intelligence gathering.

Kishiar nodded approvingly.

"Consider Devran Hartude as well. He was in charge of gathering information in disguise alongside Steiber while staying in the capital this time."

"Is that so?"

"It wouldn't hurt to listen to his story in detail and make a decision."

"Understood. I will do that. Oh, and…"

Yuder also brought up another matter he had been contemplating since his time in the west.

"Sir Zuckerman and the Peletta Knights are still tracking the missing Nahan and southern merchants, correct?"

"Indeed. Do you also want to take charge of that aspect?"

There was no need for a lengthy conversation with this man.

"Yes. Actually, during Finn's time in Tainu, he checked their lodgings at my personal request. Although no evidence related to the events at the time was found, there was something that caught my attention. Specifically, I want to investigate that."

“I wasn’t aware you were involved in such matters; quite intriguing. Care to elaborate?”

Kishiar’s eyes sparkled.

After explaining the conversations he had with his colleagues about selecting aides through his authority, Yuder spoke of the information Finn had found.

“Among their possessions was an emblem featuring a shooting star, a horizon, and a sword. Based on the sketch that Finn showed me, my own investigations revealed that there is a tribe in the south that uses this emblem.”

‘Indeed, personal research also involved delving into my own memories,’ Yuder thought.

“Interesting. Do you think you and your team of five can really trace any connections or flows related to that tribe?”

“Given that Finn and I alone have uncovered this much, I don’t think it’s impossible,” Yuder responded, maintaining his composure. After a moment of silence, he spoke again. The words he was about to utter required caution, as they concerned a more immediate future.

“Finding out who is behind them is crucial for foiling another plot, but I also think it’s absolutely necessary for what comes after.”

“What comes after,” Kishiar echoed, seated at his office desk.

“As you’ve previously mentioned, the plan they were trying to carry out was a complex operation that took a lot of time and effort. Had they succeeded, they could have brought down the entire Empire. Even if the current operation is disrupted… I have a premonition that they will not back down.”

The southern merchants initially appeared to be mere lackeys of Duke Tain, vanishing when things turned sour. But in Yuder's eyes, it almost seemed as if the puppeteer of that operation had been their naive puppet.

Even if one were to question and investigate the merchants through Duke Tain, it would likely be difficult to extract any substantial information.

'What can you possibly learn from someone who didn't even know that the southern merchants he had been freely manipulating were actually Awakeners with tremendous power?'

"So, you're saying that, in your view, the ones we are currently tracking seem to be much more formidable and dangerous enemies than Duke Tain himself?"

"Put simply, yes."

Kishiar tilted his head, lightly tapping the edge of the desk with his fingers. Moments later, he looked up and flashed a cold smile.

"Very well. I trust you with this."

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The decision was swift. Kishiar trusted Yuder's abilities and told him that there was no need for frequent reporting in carrying out his activities.

"There's nothing more foolish than wanting a detailed report for every little thing in an intelligence-gathering operation where speed and secrecy are essential. Minimize interim reports and feel free to request support where needed."

"Understood."

"It's fine to make mistakes, just don't get injured."

There was no denying that the person Kishiar was referring to was Yuder. After a moment of silence, Yuder nodded.

"Will do."

Only then did Kishiar's flawless smile soften slightly. Before Yuder left, Kishiar seemed to remember something and shared an additional piece of news.

"There was another update earlier. Do you remember the assassins you captured in the Great Sarain Forest?"

Of course he did. They were the ones who had targeted Prince Ejain of Nelarn but had miscalculated and were captured instead.

"Yes. What happened to them?"

"The investigation into their backers is complete. The results aren't particularly surprising."

As expected, the assassins hailed from Aeril, the homeland of the mother of Ejain's biggest rival, the third prince. Circumstances indicated that they had undoubtedly received support from there.

Normally, they would have transferred the captured assassins to Prince Ejain's side long ago, but there was a reason they had continued investigating them.

"We succeeded in identifying people within our own Empire who aided them when they entered. It seems some powerful noble families are assisting the third prince, facilitating their illegal entry and providing them with information."

"That's hardly surprising."

"Indeed. We couldn't determine their exact identities, but knowing this much is sufficient for now."

The reason the assassins could so easily track Prince Ejain within an Empire foreign to their own was that the power and position of their helpers were notably high.

There were only a few people capable of this, and even fewer with the motive.

'One of the four Dukes, most likely. To be specific, one of the three, excluding Apeto who wouldn't have the nerve.'

It was unlikely that Ejain's enemies in Nelarn didn't know the real reason he had ventured to the Orr Empire under the guise of attending the Harvest Festival. Just as Ejain sought a way to resolve his crisis in the Empire, his enemies must have also extended their hands to influential nobles in the Empire to thwart him.

Whoever had accepted that overture had clearly calculated the odds. It was a win-win for them—help eliminate a prince without solid backing in another country and curry favor with a likely future king.

‘They probably thought it would be trivial, just helping to remove a prince from another country.’

However, the second prince returned safely to his homeland. Though the Cavalry had assisted in his safe return, no one noted that the prince’s return and the cavalry’s monster-hunting mission in the west coincidentally occurred at the same time.

And the shocking news that the prince had awakened before returning to his homeland was still a secret, known to no one.

A message had recently arrived at the imperial palace, reporting the safe return of Prince Ejain. “Though the situation is still dire and he can’t move freely yet, things will be different this time around. The powers he’s awakened will greatly assist him in protecting himself.”

Moreover, as he had secured the support of Emperor Keilusa, he shouldn’t face as much resistance as before.

Yuder nodded, pondering the future of Prince Ejain.

“Yes, that’s good to hear.”

“Is that the end of it?”

Kishiar’s question seemed to hint at a desire for a different answer. Yuder blinked a few times before asking, “Is there anything more you’d like me to say?”

“I just thought you might be more curious about his well-being, now that you and he have become close.”

“I never asked for this position. I find the news of the Prince’s safety to be sufficient.”

With his Awakener powers considered among the best for self-protection, it was likely that Ejain would no longer face the same

dangers as before. Perhaps it was now more constructive to think about how quickly the prince could end the struggle for the throne of Nelarn and stabilize internal affairs.

Kishiar smiled gently at Yuder's response.

"Alright, I understand."

"Then, I'll take my leave."

Yuder bowed and turned to leave. Just as he reached the door, he heard his name.

"Yuder."

He turned his head and saw a man standing near a window, radiant in the sunlight filtering in.

"Don't forget, the doors here are always open."

"…"

"Always."

Yuder suspected that this might have been what Kishiar most wanted to say.

"…Yes."

Yuder slowly nodded and stepped out of the room, feeling a warm sensation rising within him.

…

Back at the training ground, Yuder singled out the individuals he was looking for and told them to follow him. Gakane and the Eldore siblings didn't seem surprised, likely suspecting why they had been called, but Devran appeared quite anxious.

“What’s going on? Why did you call me? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s not that.”

Yuder reassured him and led them toward the medical unit.

“I have to bring one more person, so wait here for a moment. We’ll discuss everything in detail afterward.”

“There’s another person to fetch from here?”

Ignoring Devran’s uneasy voice, Yuder knocked on the door of the medical unit.

“Welcome! Did you get injured during training?”

A cheerful Lusan greeted him.

“No, where is Enon?”

“If it’s Enon you’re looking for—”

“Why am I being sought?”

A curtain was pulled aside to reveal a gruff face lying on a patient bed.

“Why are you lying there?”

“I’m recovering from fatigue after being forcibly taken on a long journey. Is there a reason I can’t lie here?”

“Let’s talk for a moment.”

“Who are the other people you brought outside?”

“They are here to hear the same thing as you.”

At these words, something seemed to click for Enon, who shook his head vehemently.

“No. I won’t do it.”

“I haven’t even said what it is yet.”

“I can smell that you’re going to ask me to do something tedious. I’m already tired enough from working here; I won’t do any more.”

“Sir Enon, at least listen to what Sir Yuder has to say before making a decision. You came all this way,” Lusan interjected with a chuckle. It seemed he had come to know very well that Enon’s grumbling wasn’t out of genuine anger. Yuder exhaled softly as he looked at Enon, who had turned his head away.

“Here, catch.”

Enon reflexively caught the object Yuder threw at him. Upon realizing what it was, he let out a sigh. A lemon, bright yellow and aromatic, glistened in his hand.

‘I did well to grab a lemon from the cafeteria before heading to the training ground.’

“Eat it, and we’ll go.”

“You little—since returning from the West, you’ve grown crafty.”

Enon grumbled and showed irritation, but eventually, he sat up and took a bite. His once furrowed brows relaxed, and his expression softened.

“Ah, fine, I’ll go. Just know that if it’s not important, I’ll leave right after hearing it,” Enon said as he approached, a trace of an indistinct expression aimed at Yuder’s face.

“By the way, what did you do during your vacation?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Something seems—”

Enon paused, seemingly noticing Lusan who was eavesdropping on their conversation.

“No, let’s talk after this is done.”

Yuder and Enon exited the medical quarters. Outside, the four waiting people watched Enon chew on the lemon and exchanged a variety of expressions.

“Now that we’re all here, let’s go up.”

Yuder led them to the break room and took a seat. Since all the members were in the middle of training, the place was empty.

“First, let me explain why I’ve gathered you all here. Some may already know, but some may not.”

Yuder began explaining, gauging the expressions on Devran and Enon’s faces.

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The expressions of those who had heard about the authority granted from Kishiar, its contents, and the intention to establish a new intelligence department within the Cavalry, were varied.

There was Gakane, with his sunken face; the Eldore siblings, who couldn’t conceal their excitement as they exchanged glances; and Devran, who couldn’t hide his bewilderment at the sudden proposal.

Among them, the only one showing no change in expression was Enon, who spoke first.

“Intelligence, huh? You must have a very specific need if you’re planning to start this now. What information are you after?”

“I’ll tell you once you’ve definitively agreed to be a part of this.”

“Of course we’re in!”

“We’ve been waiting for today!”

The Eldore siblings exclaimed, raising their voices. Gakane, who was expected to agree as well, hesitated oddly.

“Gakane. What about you?”

“Uh? I… “

Only then did Gakane lift his head, rubbing his temples as he sighed.

“Uh, yeah. I want to participate. Of course.”

He accepted, but his response was peculiar. Yuder narrowed his eyes subtly and began to scrutinize Gakane's face more carefully than before. The Eldore siblings also wore similar expressions as they threw a question.

"Gakane. You've been going on and on about wanting to do this with Yuder. Why do you sound so hesitant now that the time has come?"

"Are you still hurting from that injury? We saw your shadow flickering during training earlier!"

"No, it's not that. Did I… really say that?"

"You did! Repeatedly!"

"Uh, honestly, you did seem to make a lot of mistakes today."

Devran, who had been silent until now, also agreed. Faced with this, Gakane turned his uneasy eyes toward Yuder. Yuder observed Gakane's face, which looked paler than usual, before speaking.

"Gakane. I initially asked you because I thought you'd be suitable for this, but if you're feeling burdened or have difficulties participating, it's okay not to. I won't hold it against you."

"No, I really wanted to. I'm glad you formally proposed it. But… well…"

Gakane trailed off, his head lowered as he mumbled, seemingly overwhelmed by the gazes upon him.

"Ever since I heard what the Commander said this morning, I've been worried… and I couldn't focus because of it. I'm sorry."

"The Commander's words?"

"…"

Yuder wanted to ask specifically what he was referring to, but he sensed that pushing further would only make Gakane more uncomfortable. It was an intuition gained from his long-standing experience as a Commander.

‘Anyway, he seems to want to participate in the intelligence unit. I’ll have to talk to him later about why he’s so down.’

“Alright, understood. It seems your intent to participate is clear.”

Yuder decided to move on at that point. Devran, upon making eye contact, slightly hunched his shoulders but then straightened up assertively.

“Devran. There’s something I’d like to ask you before I hear your answer.”

“What is it?”

“The Commander actually recommended you for this. He praised your performance in the recent mission with Steiber, saying you did an excellent job gathering intelligence.”

“Oh, really? The Commander… I see!”

Finally, Devran seemed to understand why he had been summoned, his face brightening up.

“I’d like to hear more about that mission if you don’t mind.”

“In comparison to you all who’ve been flying around in the west, what I’ve done isn’t particularly noteworthy. But if you want to hear it…”

Devran was among the small group of members who had stayed in the capital, including Steiber. Originally, their role was to guard the Cavalry headquarters and only head west when a request for

reinforcement came in. Therefore, they didn't have much to do on a regular basis.

However, the situation changed one day when Steiber received a letter containing a secret mission directive from Kishiar. Kishiar had selected both Steiber and Devran for an undercover job at a high-end gambling establishment frequented by a particular nobleman.

"A high-end gambling establishment?"

"Wow, that must have been fun. How was it?"

"Fun, my foot. The nobles had all the fun, and I was left cleaning up their trash and serving drinks! But they did pay well, so it was bearable."

Steiber and Devran took jobs at the establishment and waited for the nobleman and his Southern foreign companion to make an appearance. After a period of diligent waiting, they finally succeeded in observing the nobleman and the foreign merchant who accompanied him.

"Because Steiber was too old to get a job that allowed access to the main hall, he went in as a chef. I was the only one who could keep an eye on those people. So, I thought I should scrutinize anything even remotely suspicious."

Drawing on his accumulated experience, Devran studied the relationship between the nobleman and the Southern merchant. He noticed that their relationship was somewhat peculiar for what should have been a typical patron-client interaction.

"From what I saw, it was a bit strange. A noble of that rank relying so heavily on one person's advice? Asking him about what games to play, how many chips to bet, even how to move in those games? I got the impression that the foreigner was suspicious."

Devran grinned as if recalling the moment.

“So, I consulted with Steiber and said that since the guy seemed sketchy, I would discreetly follow him. But whether he sensed it or not, he slipped away. Never saw him at that place again.”

“Hmm.”

Kishiar clearly had good reason to recommend Devran. The ability to quickly recognize suspicious activities and decide how to act was not a skill easily acquired.

‘He could be useful with the right training.’

“Thanks for sharing. Now I see why the Commander recommended you. So, are you willing to join us?”

Caught off-guard by the unexpected compliment, Devran’s face registered surprise. Quickly, he tried to mask his pleasure.

“Sure. If Yuder values my skills so highly, how could I refuse?”

“Devran. If you’re happy, just show it.”

“Fine. My nostrils are practically double their normal size, I’m so thrilled. Shall I shout it out for you?”

“What are you talking about! When did I—”

The Eldore siblings, who had been tormenting a downcast Gakane, had found a new target for teasing in Devran. In the meantime, Yuder turned his head toward Enon, who was sitting with a somewhat haughty posture, his arms crossed.

“Now it’s just you left.”

“…”

“Since you haven’t left, can I take that as consent?”

“…Sigh.”

Enon let out a deep sigh and finally spoke.

“Let me ask you one thing. Do you think I’m really necessary? I’m not an Awakener.”

“You know a lot about that world. It’s good to accept help when it’s offered.”

“I have medical duties and other responsibilities. I can’t follow you around full-time like these guys. Is that still fine?”

This was almost like permission. Since Yuder had no plans to move with the other members in the first place, he quickly responded, “That’s fine.”

“You belong to the intelligence division, but I intend to give you the freedom to operate separately. I’ll inform you of what needs to be investigated, but you’re free to pursue it in whatever way you wish, just like before.”

“And I’ll share the results, I presume?”

“…”

“You really know how to make good use of me.”

How did I end up stuck with this bothersome guy? The complaint that Enon had voiced several times before once again slipped quietly from his lips.

Nevertheless, in the end, Enon accepted Yuder’s request.

“Fine. I got it. But don’t expect me to attend annoying meetings like this again. If you have anything to tell me, just contact me

directly.”

“Understood. Thanks, Enon.”

“…”

Instead of responding, Enon aggressively chewed on the last remaining piece of lemon peel.

“Then it’s decided that everyone will participate. Thank you for accepting.”

“So, can we now hear what our first task for investigation will be? Tell us quickly!”

At Hinn’s eager request, Yuder scanned everyone’s faces once before sharing their first assignment.

“A while ago, we acquired some information. Our job is to follow where that information leads, find our target, and gather whatever intelligence we can.”

“Information?”

“Yes, specifically this.”

Yuder pulled out a piece of paper that had a decrypted note from Duke Tain’s message that he had remembered.

“Um… this alone doesn’t tell us what or who the target is. I can’t even guess.”

“Is it an address? A time?”

“I have a rough idea of where we need to go. And who we need to find. I’ll inform you of that shortly. And one more thing.”

Yuder continued cautiously.

“The investigation isn’t just one thing. Aside from this, there’s something else I’d like you to look into personally.”

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“Another one here?”

“You’ll know when you see it, Finn.”

Yuder flipped the paper, revealing the emblem sketched on the back. It was the emblem of a Southern tribe that Finn had discovered.

“Ah! That’s the one I found!”

“What is it?”

“It’s the emblem inside the lodging of the Southern merchants who came to Tainu! I sneaked in and found it on Yuder’s request!”

In response to Devran’s question, Finn proudly answered and then slightly tilted his head.

“But why? You never said anything about it after everything was over. So I thought it wasn’t a big deal…”

“After personal investigation, I found out that this is the emblem of a certain tribe in the South.”

The Southern merchants who had fled Tainu were currently being pursued by the Tainu Knights. Upon hearing that Yuder thought it best to conduct further investigations unique to their own Cavalry, the Eldore siblings and Devran’s eyes sparkled to the point of being uncomfortable.

“That’s true! They’re Awakeners too, so it’s good for us to take on this job!”

“It’s a perfect start!”

“Did you do all this alone during your vacation, Yuder? You should have called us!”

Although what he had done during his vacation was a different matter, Yuder made no mention of it. Instead, he cautioned against making their investigation too flashy and reminded them not to neglect their training for this.

“Move in pairs or groups when conducting investigations. Except for Enon, everyone should be accompanied by either me or someone else. If you must leave alone for some unavoidable reason, leave a signal you learned during training.”

“Wow… I’ve only learned it but never got to use it. This will be fun.”

“Don’t just think it’ll be fun. This is the real deal.”

“I know! I was just saying it’s exciting, Yuder!”

Finn raised his hand and grinned.

“Don’t worry! We’ll start with the library!”

Although slightly worried, Yuder knew the Eldore siblings were incredibly reliable when it came to completing tasks, despite their mischievous demeanor in their past lives.

It wouldn’t be much different in this lifetime.

Yuder exhaled softly and flipped the paper back over. Information from Duke Diarca’s note was revealed again.

“Now, everyone, focus. I’ll explain more about the parts written here.”

He pointed to a line of numbers and text, capturing everyone's attention.

"It may look complicated with all the numbers, but the meaning is simple once you understand. This indicates the day this month when the water of the Sixth Wall's fountains will change, this is the time, and this is the address of the 148th building located on the 4th Knight's road in the Fifth Wall. The last number is the amount: 500,000."

"So, it's the details of a transaction?"

"Exactly."

Devran proudly shrugged, having guessed correctly.

"So who's conducting this transaction?"

"The sender of this transaction promise is Duke Diarca, and the recipients are unidentified healers who are busy treating the Crown Prince, whose health is not good these days. The ones we need to investigate are those healers."

Eyes widened in unison among the members, surprised at the gravity of the source of the information.

"Diarca? The Duke?"

"The Crown Prince?"

"The day the fountains of the Twelve Sages in the Sixth Wall change their water is tomorrow. In other words, if we go to this address at the time indicated here, we will surely see them conducting the transaction."

"Uh… so we're going there too?"

"Yes."

“What do we have to do? Raid the deal and catch them?”

“No. What we’re doing is surveilling the scene and following the healers. If I’m right, they’re likely Awakeners, making it hard to track them. Don’t underestimate the job.”

A tense silence fell, punctuated by someone loudly swallowing their saliva.

“We’ll meet after lunch tomorrow at the entrance of the Imperial Knights headquarters. Make sure you slip out without drawing attention. You can bring anything helpful, but do it discreetly.”

“We’ll wear civilian clothes, right?”

“Yes.”

“Great! See you then!”

The members got up from their seats. Yuder tried to detain Gakane to ask about a concern he had, but just then, Enon spoke up.

“Don’t you have something to talk about with me?”

Although Eldore siblings and Devran momentarily showed curious expressions, they courteously made themselves scarce. Gakane, who also wore a grim face, did the same.

‘Darn, I missed my chance.’

As Yuder was watching his back, Enon clicked his tongue and spoke.

“If you’re concerned about the redhead, catch him alone later. People like him get shy under public scrutiny. It would be counterproductive to talk now.”

“How did you know I wanted to talk to Gakane?”

“Kids your age are an open book.”

No point arguing about being called kids; it would never have made sense to Enon. Yuder decided to give up on detaining Gakane and sat back down.

“Alright, what did you want to talk about?”

“First, give me your hand. Take off your glove.”

Enon straightened his posture and examined Yuder’s hand, measured his forehead temperature, and scrutinized his face earnestly. Yuder could only speak after Enon finally let go of his hand.

“Is something wrong?”

“Your soul, actually.”

Enon responded with a furrowed brow.

“It’s in far better condition compared to before your vacation. What exactly have you been doing?”

‘My soul is in better condition?’

Considering Enon had always warned about his soul’s instability and possible dire consequences, this was unbelievable news. But something must have changed during the vacation.

‘There’s only one factor that comes to mind.’

Yuder hesitated briefly before speaking.

“The only unusual thing was spending time with the Commander.”

“Commander? But you two shouldn’t have been together for the entire vacation. You weren’t working. Even if you shared a room in the west… this is too much…”

“…”

Seeing Yuder’s silent face, something seemed to click for Enon. His eyes twitched as if sensing something, then scrutinized Yuder once more with a piercing gaze.

“Wait. Could it be… you…”

“…”

Enon abruptly stood up from his seat.

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“No. Weren’t you just recently agonizing over whether to discuss the past? I thought I had resolved it to some extent by making sacrifices with this very body, and now what…!”

Enon had an exceptional ability to sense things, as he had often claimed he could easily read the minds of younger people. Yuder had no intention of revealing it this way, but since Enon had caught on, there was no need to hold back any longer. Yuder took a shallow breath and spoke.

“…That’s how it is. Your suspicions are probably correct.”

“Really? You actually did it during the holiday?”

“Yes.”

Upon vocalizing his answer, Yuder felt a sudden realization that all those events had indeed transpired in reality, and an odd sensation washed over him. Enon, too, appeared to share a similar emotion, his eyes twitching in a complicated expression before he finally exploded.

“What happened to the libido suppressant I gave you!”

“…So that’s your first question? I didn’t take it. You said it was natural, so I believed you.”

If it hadn’t been for those words, Yuder might have taken even longer to decide to turn the key to their relationship anew.

“…”

“I chose to stay with Commander because I wanted to. I’ll probably continue to do so.”

Enon had been the one who knew best how Yuder had evolved to reach this point. If Yuder had decided that it was okay for everyone to know about his changing relationship with Kishiar, then Enon was surely one of the first who should be informed.

“So I have no regrets.”

“You don’t regret it?”

Enon’s gaze became almost piercing as he suddenly stood up. A moment later, he collapsed back into his chair, holding his forehead in his hands.

“Ha. The medication you took to the west, worried that the surrounding mages might get exhausted—that was also for the Commander, wasn’t it?”

“…”

“I thought so… But how can you be sure that this isn’t just a temporary addiction effect, triggered by the mutual attraction between two Awakeners with opposing second genders?”

Caught off guard by the unexpected question, Yuder looked up in confusion.

“What are you talking about?”

“After I asked you about this, I started gathering some information from other members. They say there’s nothing as blind and temporary as attraction due to second gender connection. Were you aware of that? If this is just a transient phenomenon, you may be taking an enormous risk.”

“Enon.”

Yuder cut him off.

“Is that why you asked me about it back then?”

“Yes! If you weren’t acting so irresponsibly with your own body, would I have been curious?”

“…”

“I’ve been suspicious from the start. Changing the future, not taking revenge, but simply sticking around a specific individual—I thought you weren’t a typical madman… I wanted to discuss this issue with you when you returned, but then this happened…”

It appeared that Enon’s suspicion and concern had started much earlier than Yuder had imagined. He had noticed occasions when Enon suddenly got angry or displayed a strange reaction, but he hadn’t paid much attention to them. Now he considered that these might have been related to this issue.

However, Enon’s anger didn’t last long. It seemed to dissolve when he couldn’t find a trace of hesitation in Yuder’s eyes.

After a long silence, Yuder finally spoke.

“I appreciate your concern. But there’s no need to worry. I’ve already thought everything through.”

“…”

“It wasn’t because I manifested a second gender that I chose to be with the Commander. To be honest, that wasn’t even a starting point for me. It was rather the opposite. I’m sure of it.”

Enon remained silent for a while.

Just when he thought the conversation might end there, Enon quietly opened his mouth.

“So, he now knows everything about you?”

“No.”

“What? Didn’t you say it was all out in the open? Then what—”

“He doesn’t know everything yet, but it’s okay now. The issue has been resolved.”

“I really don’t understand you. Nor the Commander, for that matter. No matter how I see it, this seems crazier than any of the insane things you plan to do in the future.”

His tone was harsh, but embedded within it was a genuine concern for Yuder. Yuder thought of all the risks Enon had just summarized as ‘insane things,’ and quietly smiled.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“…”

Whether Enon thought he was being mocked, he shut his mouth with a grimace. But Yuder’s gratitude was sincere.

He had never before realized how significant it was to have someone wholeheartedly speak on his behalf. Whether or not anyone was concerned about him, Yuder had always been on edge, wary of others.

It might not be dramatically better now compared to then, but at least he could genuinely believe there was no need to be overly cautious or suspicious.

After a moment lost in thought, he spoke as sincerely as possible.

“At first, I never thought I’d end up like this, never thought I’d be involved with the Commander either. But now it’s better than it was. If my soul has found peace since being together, then the choice can’t have been entirely bad. And I intend to keep it that way. So, don’t think too poorly of the situation.”

“…”

“The Commander said he would wait for me until the end. It’s my choice now, and the same goes for the vacation.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me…”

With an exasperated sigh, Enon ruffled his hair as he let out yet another uncountable curse.

“Let me ask you one more thing. Was there anything like this in the ‘past’?”

“We were entangled, but it wasn’t the same.”

The person he had been involved with might have been the same, but nothing else about the circumstances was. And the outcomes were different, too.

Enon, who had been staring intently at Yuder’s face without blinking, slowly responded.

“Fine, I get it.”

Through his voice, Yuder sensed that Enon had softened emotionally and regained his composure.

“How’s your body? Any pain?”

“None. I’m fine.”

“I’d trust you only if you were as big as Kishiar.”

Enon stood up from his seat after making a light jab at Kishiar's size. He looked as if he had aged years in just a few minutes.

"Leaving?"

"Yes. I had more to say, but I'm too tired. I need to rest if I'm to follow you tomorrow. We'll talk more later."

"You're coming tomorrow?"

"I need to know who I'm dealing with if I'm to investigate on my own. It's faster to see it firsthand if it's happening in the capital."

With that, Enon waved his hand in a somewhat hasty gesture and left. Yuder stood up from his seat, watching Enon's retreating figure. For some reason, he felt like returning to Kishiar's office where he had just left.

…

The following day was one of those rare occasions in the history of the Orr Empire where something extraordinary occurred.

The head of the Tain Ducal House, one of the four great noble families that wielded immense power over the Orr Empire, stood trial. The Duke had exploited his position, which allowed him control over the western trade routes, to illegally smuggle dangerous goods. Worse still, he was accused of human trafficking and even running slave auctions.

However, the atmosphere was entirely different from the trial of the Apeto family. Most of those who came forward to defend the Tain Duke were from other families. As for the Tain family itself, it was quite the opposite. People were rushing in to condemn the Duke, citing even more reasons than the charges that had already been levied against him.

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For a long time, Duke Tain had been using the family's assets as he pleased without consultation, wielding his authority recklessly and squandering over half of the once-considerable fortune. Most of the personal lands and money he had owned had either been squandered or invested recklessly ages ago.

When the news spread that the duke was under investigation, a storm of whispers followed, claiming that the overseas investment projects he had initiated under the family name were also fraught with chronic financial issues. Those who had tolerated delayed payments solely because of the name of the Tain family began to raise an uproar. Scandals that had been suppressed through the power of his authority burst forth one after another.

Priscilla Van Tain, the newly designated heir of the Tain dukedom, was so swamped with handling the multitude of communications that she sent word she could not attend her father's trial, creating a significant ripple among the aristocracy.

To make matters worse, even the men sent by Duke Diarca to assist Duke Tain returned to Duke Diarca, shaking their heads as they found no viable solutions. And it was more than just a rumor. The real issue was that Duke Tain had not gratefully accepted the help offered by Diarca.

Eventually, Duke Diarca discreetly withdrew his prior support before Duke Tain's trial, skillfully distancing himself. Rumors circulated among the Crown Prince's supporters that in private, Duke Diarca had referred to Duke Tain as "the epitome of foolish blood expelled by the Tain family," declaring there was no need to waste even a penny on helping him.

Duke Tain defended himself by blaming the Southern merchants for providing incorrect information, but public opinion was not in his favor. It didn't help that during his investigation, not only had he lost his aristocratic composure but had even physically assaulted the investigating officers, demanding they bring in the Southern merchants.

"Rumor has it he was so addicted to gambling that he spent millions daily at high-end gambling houses."

"The Tain family is almost out of both land and money. Even the ancestral mansion was mortgaged to a foreign country, and everyone found out too late."

"He was so desperate to solve the issues that he even sold off treasures passed down since the founding of the country. What a waste. I feel sorry for the heir."

"I wouldn't be surprised if the stubborn old men of the Tain family assassinate the Duke before the trial even ends."

The rumors spread like wildfire, thanks in part to the discreet efforts of the Emperor and his subordinates. Using information collected by the officials he had dispatched to the west, the Emperor launched an effective public relations campaign. He made it appear as if the problem lay solely with Duke Tain, who had dragged his family and heirs into disrepute. This tactic had a far greater effect than anyone involved had anticipated.

Those who had supported him because of his name began to betray Duke Tain one by one as the situation grew dire. Cunning individuals like Baron Willhem had long since shown their willingness to admit that everything had been done under Duke Tain's orders.

Witnesses to the acts commanded by Duke Tain also expressed their intent to appear in the related trials. Among them were the leader of the Western Mage Union, Micalin Punt, and his mages;

Baron Koelt, who had been monitoring the actions of Baron Willhem all along; Awakeners who had narrowly avoided becoming victims of human trafficking; and even participants in the illegal auctions, hoping to lighten their own crimes. Evidence and testimonies abounded.

The true nature of a man who had neither the skill to win allies, nor social influence, nor ability, was exposed for all to see even before the trial began.

The courtroom, where not even the Duke's wife had appeared, was filled to capacity with people who had come to witness the downfall of a man once deemed one of the most noble in the empire.

Before them, Duke Tain cut a pitiful figure, hiding behind those who spoke in his defense.

Though Duke Tain acted as if he knew much about his own schemes, he actually knew nothing substantial. He couldn't even remember how much he had gambled, or which items he had smuggled, without someone to rely upon.

So began the pathetic trial, devoid of any expectation that the Duke would prevail, contrasting sharply with the prestige of the four great ducal houses. At that moment, the twelve fountains symbolizing the six walls of the imperial capital initiated their semi-annual water replacement.

The ancient and beautiful fountains, just by undergoing their water replacement, always drew crowds. And where there is a crowd in one place, it means fewer people elsewhere.

Thus, within the normally busier fifth wall, six people gathered, dressed in a way that attracted no attention.

Naturally, these were Yuder Aile and his companions, who had escaped from their Cavalry headquarters in civilian attire for today's

task and had arrived near the location of the planned transaction.

“Wow, it’s really odd how few people there are. Is this fountain water replacement really that interesting?”

“I heard from some locals today that mages from the Imperial Mage Office come out and change the water over the course of half a day. It must be quite the spectacle.”

Hinn answered Devran’s question.

“Seriously? It takes half a day just to handle twelve fountains? The guys in our Cavalry who deal with water would do a better job.”

“Exactly! If Yuder did it, it’d be over in a second.”

“…”

Yuder remained silent, watching his colleagues puffing up with pride. The commonsense answer that the reason for today’s low turnout was not only the fountain water replacement but also Duke Tain’s trial seemed irrelevant here.

‘Choosing the day when the attention of the entire capital is most scattered must have been intentional.’

Up to this point, most of the people they had seen were engrossed in one of the two major events, making it a perfect day for a clandestine transaction.

“…Hey, there’s a suspicious guy over there.”

Then, Enon, with his craggy face standing next to Yuder, spoke up. He pointed to a man lugging a large bag, wandering around and approaching them. Though the man seemed to make an effort to look unsuspicious, Yuder could clearly see the caution and flaws in his behavior.

‘He’s not used to this kind of thing. What he’s carrying must be money…’

After making his assessment, Yuder signaled to his companions.

“Looks like the Diarca side has arrived. Focus, and be careful not to get caught. Gakane, do as we discussed earlier.”

“…Yes.”

Gakane nodded and expanded the size of the shadow clone that had so far concealed its presence. From a distance, it looked like an impenetrable darkness, making it difficult to see what lay within.

A person from Diarca’s side glanced around before entering the building indicated by the address on the note. The place appeared to be a rather ordinary house.

Not long after, another group appeared from the opposite direction. Five individuals, their faces hidden beneath travelers’ cloaks, drew near.

‘The man in front looks fairly old. And the ones behind him are young men and women… Is he the leader of the group?’ Yuder thought.

While Yuder and his team observed, the group stopped in front of their target house and knocked on the door. It soon opened. Only after they had filed in did Yuder’s team exhale the breath they had been holding.

“Phew. Are those five the healers?”

“Most likely.”

“It’s hard to tell if they are Awakeners just by looking at them.”

“Definitely,” Yuder asserted, eliciting expressions of awe from the other members.

“How can you be so sure? Can you sense it?”

“It’s not so much about sensing… If an Awakener is using their abilities, I can faintly see it if I concentrate.”

“You can see that?”

“Ever since I recovered from injuries in the West, my eyes have improved.”

Yuder had been able to vaguely see the flow of energy emanating from Awakeners before, but since his Eye of Magic had opened, this perception had significantly sharpened. He could clearly see the transparent aura emanating from the body of the man in the lead, even though they were quite far away.

Whatever the man was doing, he was continuously using some kind of ability.

“Speaking of which, after Gakane recovered from his injuries, his shadow clone ability improved. Does our power grow every time we recover from injuries?”

“Uh, well, now that I think about it, my own abilities did improve after I nearly died in Hartan,” Devran recalled, as he responded to Hinn’s curious question. Yuder, concerned that his promising young members might willingly injure themselves to gain power like in a previous life, immediately issued a warning.

“Don’t even think about risking yourselves like that. There’s no guarantee that you’ll always become stronger after recovering from an injury. Better to just concentrate on regular training.”

“As if we’d do something as ridiculous as jumping off a cliff to improve our abilities. You underestimate us, Yuder.”

Finn chuckled, feigning weakness. His innocent yet mischievous expression betrayed no hint of the grim fact that, in a previous life, some members had actually attempted such foolhardy acts.

“But do we just keep waiting like this until they come out? I’m getting impatient.”

“Should Finn and I teleport inside the second floor of that house and eavesdrop?”

“There’s no need to take such risks; we already know what the transaction entails. We stick to the original plan and follow the healers once they leave.”

“Um… they seem to be coming out already.”

Gakane, who had been steadily enlarging the shadow clone, quietly spoke. True to his words, the door of the house where the people had entered creaked slightly.

A moment later, the door opened and the envoy from Diarca, along with the five healers, emerged. Yuder quickly changed the direction of the wind so that their conversation could be heard more clearly.

“…All checks have been completed. You have accurately given all 500,000. We’re also pleased with the new accommodations you’ve provided. Please pass on our thanks.”

“Understood. If you encounter any discomfort during your stay, feel free to speak up. I shall take my leave now.”

The man from the Diarca faction bowed deeply to the healers. As he did, Yuder felt an odd sense of discomfort. The man’s demeanor

was now overly familiar and polite, a stark contrast to the apprehension and caution he'd exhibited upon entering.

Once the man from Diarca turned his back and left, the healers collectively removed the hats they had been wearing. Their faces seemed to brighten as they exhaled in relief. One among them turned to an older individual and spoke cheerfully.

"Sage, you've worked hard. Starting today, this will be our new lodging…"

"Did I hear that right? 'Sage'?"

Devran, who had overheard the conversation, questioned with a smirk. However, what he said went unnoticed, for Yuder was deeply stunned by something else.

'…Whose face is that?'

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Yuder’s gaze was neither focused on the middle-aged man known as the Sage, nor on the bespectacled young man who was speaking to him. What had truly caught Yuder’s attention was a timid young man standing at the farthest corner, clutching the hem of his cloak tightly.

‘His face looks much younger than I remember, but the reddish skin indicative of southern heritage, the long scar on one ear, even the color of his eyes…’

He looked strikingly similar to the ‘Sage’ who would reveal himself years from now, if one disregarded age.

In Yuder’s mind, the face of the ‘Sage,’ whom he had personally executed for bewitching Emperor Katchian in his past life, resurfaced.

The current ‘Sage’ of the Star of Nagran had been an extremely elderly man with long hair when he revealed himself years after the Star of Nagran’s internal demise. His back hunched, he found it difficult to walk without a cane, and his skin was full of wrinkles. To anyone who saw him, he appeared to be close to his final days. Such an elderly Awakener was exceedingly rare, so much so that Yuder had never met another like him.

Kanna never referred to the Sage from this timeline, who existed prior to the residents of Star of Nagran, as an old man. She had said he was somewhat advanced in age, which meant around the same age as Steiber or just a bit older. Other descriptions and actions thus far hardly resembled the ‘Sage’ Yuder had killed.

The ‘Sage’ had garnered an undeserved title of ‘spiritual mentor’ and had led many followers, but he was neither moderate nor

meticulous. The reason he could attract so many followers despite his inconsistency was his ability to scratch people's hidden ulterior motives with cruel words nonchalantly.

The 'Sage' blamed the weakness of the world on the weak, preaching that the superior should punish and make them repent. When secretly applying his awakened ability, he could achieve astonishing effects even with a minor mental power that barely changed people's moods.

Had Yuder not boldly dragged him in front of Emperor Katchian to interrogate him, had he not rattled the man by recalling that the name of his cult, 'Star of Nagran,' coincided with a long-gone terrorist group, Yuder might have met an earlier end. Emperor Katchian's trust in the man had been that deep at the time.

Therefore, Yuder had never been particularly convinced that the 'Sage' he killed in his past life was the same as the Sage of the Star of Nagran existing in this timeline. The Sage of this era, at least on the surface, acted contrary to his own actions, leading Awakeners while meticulously hiding from the state.

He did know in his past life that the man he killed had some connection with the current Star of Nagran. He had always intended to gladly deal with him if they ever crossed paths again, but…

'I never thought I'd encounter him so young, here of all places.'

Yuder scanned the young 'Sage's' face, tinged with a mixture of disappointment and puzzlement.

'How is this possible? It's only been 11 years. Could that old appearance in my previous life have been conjured by his abilities?'

At that moment, another young man standing beside the 'Sage' gently tapped him on the back and spoke. Although the voice was

too soft to catch the words clearly, the name caught Yuder's attention.

"…Let's go, Diemon."

'Diemon. Different from the alias he used in my previous life. I wonder if that's his real name.'

Yuder committed the name to memory. Only then did he turn his gaze toward the middle-aged man whom the youths had called Sage.

The man looked like any middle-aged man one might encounter from the Empire. His grey-white brown hair and smiling face gave off an impression of kindness that anyone would feel, and his eyes were incredibly warm.

"Let's go inside, Sage. It's cold. If you're planning to go out tomorrow…"

Pressured by the awkward yet caring gestures of the young men, the middle-aged man, referred to as the Sage, entered the house. Among them was the 'Sage' from his previous life who timidly held out his hand and mumbled.

Yuder swallowed a cold, sardonic laugh at the sight.

"…They've gone in? If that house is their new base, we won't have to follow them immediately. What do you think, Yuder?"

Hinn grinned as he asked, his tone suggesting that he was open to any course of action. Yuder finally shifted his gaze away from the closed door and looked around at everyone.

"…I agree, there's no need to follow them right away. But I think I've found out something important."

“Something important? Like what?”

“Their true identities.”

“Huh? They’re Awakeners, aren’t they? What else is there?”

“We all know about the Star of Nagran group that we chased in Tainu, right?”

Feeling the eyes of his comrades upon him, Yuder spoke slowly yet gravely.

“They’re not ordinary Awakeners. They are definitely part of the Star of Nagran. The one they called the Sage seems to be their leader.”

“The leader of the Star of Nagran? That old guy?”

Finn, who had personally confronted the Star of Nagran in Tainu, widened his eyes in disbelief and quickly turned his head toward the house where the Sage and the young men had entered.

“What? I thought Finn said you had captured all of them except one.”

“That’s only part of it.”

“So…we’ve hit the jackpot, then?”

Hinn swiftly came to a conclusion. Her eyes, cute as a water fairy’s, twinkled uncontrollably with excitement.

“What should we do? Charge in right now?”

“No. Other than coming to treat the Crown Prince, they haven’t done anything yet. We need to prioritize gathering information. I’ll report to the Commander, and as for surveillance…”

“I’ll handle that part.”

Enon, who had remained silent and withdrawn up to this point, suddenly spoke up. Everyone except Yuder looked at him with puzzled eyes.

“Can you handle surveillance alone? How?”

“I’ve lived in the capital for quite some time and know people here and there. Monitoring a single house should not be a problem.”

His nonchalant tone seemed to reassure the team, as a ‘I see’ expression faintly dawned on their faces.

“That makes sense. If you’ve been living here, then…”

“So that’s why Yuder brought you along.”

“…I’ll attach my shadow to that house as well. That way, we can at least detect when they leave.”

Gakane added softly. His abilities had advanced considerably during the western mission; not only could he manifest his shadow as a separate entity, but he could also use it to track specific targets. One of the new skills he’d acquired was the ability to attach his shadow to someone and detect their movements.

‘I had heard the story while returning from the West, but this was the first time I actually saw it written down. I was struggling to grasp its full implications.’

Yuder inquired to get a precise understanding of Gakane’s ability.

“So, up to what distance does this work?”

“The further the distance, the less I can perceive. But within the range between here and the Cavalry headquarters, I can sense comings and goings even in my sleep.”

“Wouldn’t it be noticeable once attached?”

“If it’s hidden in places like the shadow of a wall, no one would know. No one has ever noticed it during training either.”

“That must be really convenient. If I had that ability, I could slack off in the training ground until I sensed Yuder or the Commander approaching.”

“Finn.”

“Just kidding.”

With a stern look, Yuder, arms crossed, stared at the closed door of the house. After a moment, he made his decision.

“Fine. It seems like the best we’ve got so far, so let’s go with it. Proceed cautiously with the remaining tasks and investigate in your own ways.”

“Understood.”

Once the conclusion was reached, Finn left, stating he had other matters to attend to. Yuder took one more careful look at the lodging where the Star of Nagran was staying amidst his hurrying comrades.

‘The Sage, and Diemon.’

The current Sage and the one who would be a Sage in the future.

It felt incredibly strange that due to unforeseen circumstances in his previous life, he was seeing both of these individuals here together.

‘When I return, I’ll report this and call for Kanna. I should also visit Hosanna, and Gayle and Doyle brothers, whom I haven’t seen in a while.’

But before that, there was one more thing he had to do.

“Gakane.”

Yuder whispered softly, avoiding the eyes of the noisy Eldore siblings and Devran. The red-headed young man, who was walking a step ahead, slightly tensed his shoulders.

“Let’s talk when we get back.”

“…”

…

When they returned, the Cavalry headquarters was in the midst of practicing a dance. The members were so engrossed in learning the aristocratic dance for the first time that they hadn’t noticed a few had stealthily slipped away and returned.

The Eldore siblings ran towards their practicing comrades with bright faces, while Devran grumbled and disappeared with a reluctant expression.

As for Gakane, he was quietly observing his practicing comrades with a face that hardly ever displayed his usual smile.

Yuder spoke as he watched him.

“If you’re going to practice dancing too, we can talk afterward.”

“I… already know how to dance.”

Gakane answered softly.

“Don’t you need to practice, Yuder?”

“I also know how to dance.”

While it was true that Yuder was planning to dance man-to-man with Kishiar, since the dance's basics were already known to him, he wasn't as pressed for time as those who were starting from scratch.

"I see…"

"Anyway, if neither of us needs to practice, there's no need to stay here any longer. Follow me."

Yuder led Gakane to a secluded area. It was next to a large tree near the training ground, a place where members rarely visited at this hour.

"You've seemed off since yesterday. Is it because of what the Commander said? The thing that's been bothering you?"

"…Yuder. About the dance with the Commander. Do you really have to be the one to do it?"

Instead of answering the question, an unexpected counter-question flowed from Gakane. Yuder blinked twice.

"What?"

"While I understand the idea of changing the criteria in light of the second gender consideration, and the Commander always thinks in the right direction, so I believe it's a well-considered decision. But… why does it have to be realized in a situation that hinges on your future? Why does it have to be you?"

At the end of the rapid-fire words, Gakane bit his lip tightly. Blood rushed to his cheeks, making them flush, and beads of sweat formed next to them.

"Yuder. The social circles where nobles gather are truly terrifying places. If you start off like that, your future won't be that of a promising new star in the Cavalry; you'll be forever overshadowed by

the Commander. People might not realize how terrifying that is… but I do.”

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“Gakane, calm down for a moment.”

Yuder reached out his hand to Gakane, whose voice was escalating, and restrained him.

‘I almost always forget that this guy comes from a prominent family… Never thought I’d be reminded of it here.’

“So you’re saying… you’d rather I not dance with the Commander?”

“It’s not that I’m saying don’t do it without reason…”

“Right. For the sake of my future.”

“It’s more than just the future,” Gakane added firmly.

“I know you’ve done similar things in Tainu, but that doesn’t mean this should be taken for granted. In fact, if I had been there at that time, I would have seriously discouraged you. Your reputation would have been truly ruined, even if it was all an act.”

What Gakane was talking about had long lost any meaning for Yuder. He was someone who had already seen where his ‘promising future’ would end, and he knew it was not pretty. But he couldn’t outright say that.

Yuder decided to elaborate more on how he was fine with the situation.

“As I’ve said before, I’m fine. Dancing with the Commander won’t make the rewards I’m to receive disappear, and I have no interest in the social scene. If dancing can help mark the day when our Cavalry

receives formal commendation as the beginning of meaningful change, then I think that's a good thing."

"I know you don't care about that sort of thing. But you may not always feel that way," Gakane's voice quivered slightly.

"Please don't take it lightly. No matter how exceptional you are, once people have a bad impression of you, they will never look back. You might not need that now, but there will come a time when you do… and by then…"

Gakane's eyes weren't on Yuder. His dark green pupils trembled as they stared into empty space.

"It will already be too late."

The emotion lurking within those words was tinged with an unfamiliar light, something Yuder had not seen since meeting Gakane.

Yuder raised an eyebrow.

'Is this not just him over-worrying because he knows aristocratic sensitivities well? Could it be based on his own experiences?'

"Is this something you've experienced yourself?"

"If I say yes, will you reconsider?"

"That would be difficult. I've already promised the Commander."

"Why did you make such an important decision so impulsively? Others might not understand the risk, but if you had talked to me even once…"

"Gakane."

Yuder sighed softly, interrupting him.

“I appreciate the concern, but it has to be me who does this.”

“Please, Yuder. Don’t sacrifice yourself. Even if you’ve made a promise, the Commander will understand if you explain. Or rather, let me…”

Gakane would neither retract his worries nor cease trying to persuade Yuder. In that case, there was only one thing to say.

“I’m not making a sacrifice. This is simply the future I want. No other opportunities are necessary.”

Gakane, who had been about to continue his persuasion, closed his mouth for a moment. Yuder stared at his somewhat pale face with an expressionless look but filled with certainty.

“If you don’t understand, see it for yourself that day. I’ll show you the opportunity I seek.”

…

After his conversation with Gakane, Yuder had planned to find Kanna and meet the Awakeners belonging to the Star of Nagran. However, for some reason, he could not find Kanna anywhere he went.

After searching about three places, he eventually gave up and decided to move alone. The first place he visited was the restaurant where Gayle and Doyle were working. The brothers, who were busily peeling potatoes with knives in preparation for dinner, sprang up with surprised faces as soon as they saw Yuder.

“Uh, you…!”

“Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Well, would it be okay… after we finish peeling these potatoes?” Gayle hesitantly replied. “We have to soak them in saltwater right after, so leaving them would be a bit… If we use our abilities, we can finish quickly, so can you wait just a bit?”

“Is that so?”

Yuder’s gaze shifted toward the remaining potatoes and the large barrel of saltwater next to them. A moment later, he raised his hand and made a light flicking motion. The startled brothers quickly stepped back, but his intention was not to attack.

“What, what’s that?”

The potatoes and knives floating in the air began to move on their own. The skins were neatly peeled off, and the peeled potatoes immediately started plunging into the barrel of saltwater, one after another. The incredibly rapid process was soon over, and all that remained was a pile of potato skins, like fallen leaves on one side.

“Is that good enough?”

“Wha-, how did you do that?!”

“It doesn’t matter who does it if we were going to use abilities to peel the potatoes anyway.”

“But your ability wasn’t like this; it was more like, boom, an explosion, wasn’t it?”

“The principle is the same. Depending on how it’s manipulated, I can cause explosions or peel potatoes.”

The brothers’ eyes widened as if they were about to pop out. They looked at the perfectly peeled potatoes several times as if they couldn’t believe what had just happened and eventually followed Yuder, their faces filled with fear and anxiety.

‘Did helping them peel potatoes really scare them that much?’

At first, he thought they were just typically afraid of him, but after seeing him use his abilities, they seemed even more fearful, which somehow felt odd.

The keen sense of someone who had long been investigating suspicious matters suddenly perked up. Those brothers were hiding something.

‘I should have brought Kanna along.’

Yuder eyed the brothers cautiously and decided to probe a bit.

“Do you know why I came here?”

“…Is it because of Hosanna?”

Doyle timidly asked. It was well-known among the members that one of the Star of Nagran had been escorted from the west to this place. The brothers had gathered enough information to suspect that the person was Hosanna while doing odd jobs.

“Half-correct.”

“What did Hosanna say? That we’re going to escape?”

“We didn’t do anything! We just worked! Even when that guy Hosanna and Nahan asked us to go, we said no! We really didn’t do anything, so there’s nothing to blame us for! We’re really innocent!”

“…”

Hosanna and Nahan had asked the brothers to go?

‘Just from what they’re saying, it sounds like they have joined the Cavalry or something. When exactly…?’

The brothers still hadn’t realized they had misspoken. Although they knew that Hosanna had been captured, they didn’t know that he hadn’t even woken up yet for questioning.

Yuder decided not to share the information he had on Hosanna for the time being, opting instead to fully trust the brothers’ words. He asked them to elaborate further. What he learned was astonishing.

‘… They really went back and forth here in a carriage? Not anywhere else, but Cavalry?’ Really?’

Even if half of the Cavalry had been absent at the time, including himself, that could not serve as an excuse. The fact that no one had known about this until today was simply baffling.

Gayle and Doyle emphasized with fearful eyes that they hadn’t done anything wrong. Gayle, scared of losing their current stable and peaceful life, contrasted sharply with Doyle, who appeared to have seriously considered escape when it was suggested, and was particularly tense, breaking into a cold sweat.

‘If it’s true that Nahan told them the Sage would understand if they wanted to stay here, he must’ve been taken aback at the time too.’

It was clear why Nahan had left the brothers behind. Judging by the fact that he told them to think carefully until his return, he must’ve planned to gather information about the Cavalry through their eyes.

‘I almost got stabbed in the back from the inside. I knew his skills were unnaturally specialized in infiltration, but to pull off something like this…’

It was highly likely that the claim that Nahan had reported their survival to the Sage was false to begin with. The evidence was that no one had looked for them since his visit with Hosanna. Judging

from the reaction of the average Awakeners in the West, people seemed to think they were already dead.

“We’ve, we’ve really told you everything honestly now…”

The brothers whispered to Yuder, lost in thought. He lifted his eyes and nodded.

“Alright, go back for now.”

“Back where? Our room? We’re not going to be locked up like Hosanna, are we?”

“No intention of locking you up, just go back to the dining hall.”

“Alright!”

“You really trust us?”

Yuder sighed, brightening the brothers’ faces. Before they rushed away, Yuder left them with a word of caution.

“There was no issue this time, but if anything similar happens again, make sure to inform me first. If you want to continue working with the Cavalry, you should prioritize the safety of the place you belong to.”

The brothers scampered away, visibly chastened.

Yuder immediately headed to his next destination: the room where Hosanna lay.

“Ah, Yuder, you came to check on him?”

“Yes. Any changes?”

“Nothing much. His eyelids twitched a few times, but he hasn’t woken up.”

The member who had been holding the string wrapped around Hosanna's arm answered calmly. Sitting quietly next to Yuder as he scanned Hosanna's face and limbs, the member soon shifted uncomfortably.

"Uh… Yuder, if you're going to examine him, can I step out for a bit? I ate little this morning and danced all day; I'm really hungry."

"Go ahead. Be quick."

"Yay! I'll run and be back in no time!"

The member happily stood up and dashed out. Yuder took the string left behind, wrapped it around his hand, and sat down on the chair next to the bed. Hosanna's face, now resting on the bed, was clean and free of wounds thanks to consistent care, but showed almost no sign of vitality.

He looked down at the emaciated young man from the South and placed his hand on the stomach area to sense the inner energy.

'The recovery of his strength… hasn't changed since the last time I checked.'

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Even though his body had fully recovered, he couldn't open his eyes. The reason was the sluggish restoration of his inner energy. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have been helpless in this state, but now he knew there was one method he could employ.

A method only Yuder Aile could execute.

It was the same approach he had tried on Kishiar—directly inspecting the power of the Awakener within.

Normally, he would have waited a bit longer for him to wake up on his own before attempting it. However, considering the Sages and other members of the Star of Nagran had appeared, there was no time to delay.

'Nothing would serve as better proof that I can precisely see and manipulate the insides of others than this. If it seems too difficult to manipulate, then I'll stop right away.'

Yuder took a deep breath and focused his mind, confirming that the member that had left for a meal had not yet returned. A golden light flared in one of his eyes, and a red energy extended from the veins on the back of his gloved hand.

Moments later, energies sleeping within Hosanna's body glowed and revealed themselves before Yuder's eyes.

'So far so good… this works well even on others.'

Perhaps due to having practiced several times on Kishiar, Yuder found it much easier to inspect the insides than before.

With caution, Yuder quickly scanned Hosanna's interior, making sure the strong Red Stone energy entwining his hand didn't manifest too intensely.

Like all other Awakeners, there was a red-hued power underneath Hosanna's belly. However, it was incomparably smaller than Kishiar's and the energy flow seemed insignificant. It was like a candle on the verge of going out.

'Sharing energy as I did with Kishiar could be dangerous. Let's start by gently stimulating it.'

Yuder removed his gloves and revealed his reddened hand. The moment his fingers touched, the energy within Hosanna jolted as if pricked by a needle.

Simultaneously, Hosanna's body also responded violently, like a fish speared by a harpoon.

"…Ah!"

"…"

His eyes remained closed, but his breathing grew significantly stronger and his heartbeat quickened.

As his body started moving, the previously stagnant energy began to flow as well. Until now, the energy had been faint like a puddle in a drought, but it became clearer, following the rhythm of the heartbeat. Though it looked strained, it was undoubtedly effective.

Confirming this, Yuder started to move his hand that lay over Hosanna's jittering energy. The Awakener energy, essentially of the same Red Stone origin, reluctantly began to follow like a toddling child.

As the stagnant energy became more lively, Hosanna's fingertips also started to tremble intermittently. After repeating this several times, warmth returned to his previously cold body temperature, and his cheeks and lips also regained their rosy hue.

Yuder then withdrew his energy. The light in his eyes dimmed, and the violent red energy gradually calmed. He felt somewhat fatigued, even though only a few minutes had passed.

'But it's bearable.'

He continued to intensely observe Hosanna's eyelids, which looked as though they could open at any moment. After what felt like an eternity—

"Ah… ugh."

Finally, the trembling eyelids laboriously opened, revealing deep hazel eyes within.

The once blurry, unfocused eyes that seemed unaware of their surroundings slowly cleared up after a few sluggish blinks. Eyes that had been vacantly scanning the ceiling turned sideways to meet Yuder's face.

"Hosanna. Are you conscious?"

"…"

"I am Yuder Aile of the Cavalry. Do you remember who you are and why you're here?"

"…"

Dry lips seemed on the verge of making a sound, but then stopped. Moments later, confusion, questions, and shock began to rise one by one above Hosanna's eyes.

‘Fortunately, it doesn’t seem like he has lost his memory or become foolish.’

Yuder had been wary because it wasn’t uncommon for Awakeners who had pushed their powers to the limit and neared death to suffer such fates. It was a relief.

As if instinctively trying to flee, Hosanna attempted to use his abilities. However, his body merely flickered a couple of times; he couldn’t even exert proper strength, let alone teleport.

‘As expected.’

Without a word, Yuder raised a cord connected to Hosanna’s arm to show them.

“In your current state, you can’t use any abilities. Even if you did, it would only affect the person connected to you. So, stop wasting your energy. If you want to live, I recommend you rest without exerting yourself for a few years.”

“…Huh, eh, cough, cough.”

Hosanna attempted to speak but ended up coughing softly from their parched throat. Yuder lifted a finger and created a small droplet of water.

“You’re probably parched. Drink this first.”

Hosanna breathed slightly faster, as if anticipating an attack. Just like the brothers Gayle and Doyle, they seemed to be afraid of Yuder’s very existence.

“Just open your mouth. I’m controlling the amount of water for convenience.”

Reluctant to open his mouth, Hosanna left Yuder no choice but to support his head and gently force his jaw open. When a small stream of water flowed slowly into his mouth, Hosanna finally swallowed it, eyes flickering cautiously. It resembled a timid dog accepting water.

After sipping the small amount of water over an extended period, Hosanna seemed to sag with exhaustion, as if he had just completed a monumental task. His eyes seemed to struggle to stay open; it appeared that this was the limit of his physical strength for now.

“You’re awake, and that’s enough. We’ll talk later.”

“…”

Seeming unfazed, Yuder watched as Hosanna drifted back to sleep. His large, brown eyes harbored questions about Yuder until the end.

“Yuder! I’m back! Got caught up eating and lost track of time.”

Not long after, the member of the Cavalry who should have been on watch returned. He hadn’t even considered the possibility that Hosanna had awakened.

Instead of pointing out the crumbs on the cheerful member’s face, Yuder handed him the cord tied to Hosanna’s arm.

“Hosanna woke up briefly. He drank some water and went back to sleep, but this means his recovery will speed up considerably.”

“Wha… What?”

“Don’t let your guard down just because he can’t use his abilities. Keep it a secret that he has awakened until the Commander gives instructions. I think we should also reduce the number of people monitoring him to just a few. Now, I’ll be going.”

“What did you say?!”

Ignoring the astonished cries behind him, Yuder left the room.

His expression appeared intensely serious, but it was not because Hosanna had woken up; it was because of the man he was soon to meet in the briefing room upstairs.

“… He probably won’t be too pleased, either.”

If he reported that Hosanna had woken up, he would inevitably have to tell Kishiar what had happened while he was awake. He was confident that he could cleanly explain and make understandable the reasons for using the power of the Red Stone and its apparent effects. Yet, Yuder couldn’t help but feel a slight worry and concern that he knew would inevitably flit across Kishiar’s face, no matter what he did.

Facing a giant monster alone had been easier for Yuder than that momentary expression. But the unfamiliarity, while still uncomfortable, was no longer painful, which was quite strange.

Stopping in his tracks, Yuder ascended the stairs with a suddenly softer expression.

That day, many things within the Cavalry had changed before nightfall.

The number of guards constantly surrounding Hosanna had increased from one to two, and Lusan began to frequent his room as if it were his own dining room. In addition, security was tightened to prevent unauthorized persons from entering the area, and news of Hosanna’s waking up was only to be known by the members in charge of surveillance and the Deputy Commanders.

Aside from that, the number of personnel securing the entrance to the Cavalry headquarters had also doubled. However, thanks to a

clever arrangement of party preparations and dance practice, this change was not visible on the surface. No one knew that the innermost depths of the Cavalry headquarters, which seemed preoccupied with the upcoming party and receiving awards, were actually becoming increasingly solidified in preparation for what would follow.

People were more interested in the ongoing trials of political machinations, the new and beautiful jewels that nobles were acquiring, or whether the Emperor would make an appearance at the upcoming party, than in any changes within the Cavalry.

And this included Duke Diarca, who had also ordered a special gift to be prepared for the Cavalry.

…

Finally, the day of the party to honor the Cavalry dawned.

The official start time of the event was around sunset, but the members woke up as if it were dawn, busily polishing and preening themselves.

The formal wear they donned was similar to what Kishiar had tailored for them during the previous harvest festival, but it looked entirely different. The belts around their waists and the outer decorations had changed somewhat.

The formal wear that Kishiar had designed was fundamentally simple and white, allowing for a completely different impression with just a few changes in outerwear. Members were amazed at how different they looked with the simple addition of elegant winter scarves or shawls, or small fur capes that covered only their shoulders.

“Wow, did our Cavalry always have so many striking figures? Everyone’s suddenly transformed into nobility; it’s hard to get used

to.”

“Steiber seems to have changed the most among us.”

Deputy Commander Steiber, who had slicked back his hair with some stylish oil for today, looked at the members and chuckled.

“When is the Commander coming down?”

“He should be down soon!”

“Then we should start preparing ‘that carriage’ now.”

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At Steiber’s words, the eyes of his friends and the members who were close to him all turned meaningful and joyous, like those of delighted children.

“Wow, finally? I’m really looking forward to seeing you unveil it in front of everyone.”

“You won’t believe how well it’s preserved; it hasn’t rotted at all. I wouldn’t be surprised if you all fall over backward in awe. Hehehe.”

“Hehehehe.”

“It may not be our catch, but since we’re part of the same Cavalry, it’s almost like we caught it. So, why shouldn’t we be happy?”

“Exactly. The one who caught it doesn’t know how to smile, so it’s only fair that we enjoy it on their behalf.”

While they all wore sly smiles, the other members were busy praising each other’s outfits and happily chatting about their high expectations as they finalized their preparations to depart for the palace.

As departure time neared, carriages far more luxurious than those used during the harvest festival lined up in front of the Cavalry headquarters’s main gate. They were sent by Emperor Keilusa for today’s stars, the members of the Cavalry. Among those who were delighted by the grandiose scenery was Lusan, who had boldly joined in as a medical officer. Standing next to him with a skewed posture was Enon, who didn’t seem to care for the whole affair. However, his attire was so attractive that he couldn’t help but draw the attention of those around him.

Soon after, Ever, adorned in formal wear, descended the stairs that led to the dressing room with brisk steps.

Upon seeing the smiling Steiber and the members, she paused for a moment, then approached and spoke.

“Steiber, is something special happening? You all look so happy.”

“Oh, Ever. You look marvelous with your hair down like that. Nothing much, really. We’re just excited about moving the ‘Golden Carriage’ soon. Hehehe.”

Only then did Ever seem to understand the reason behind their smiles. A smile similar to Steiber’s appeared on her face.

“I see. Thank you for the compliment. Your hair looks great up as well. Have you considered doing it like that more often?”

“Hmm… applying oil and styling it every day might be a bit too much. But thanks for the compliment.”

Steiber closed his eyes briefly and then reopened them, smiling.

“By the way, where is your expected partner?”

“Ah, Gakane went to help Kanna with Jimmy. It’s about the clothes.”

“Ah, yes. I heard Jimmy has grown a lot lately, so he needed some major clothing adjustments?”

Steiber warmly smiled, thinking of the young boy growing up so quickly even though he should still miss his parents. Then, he subtly shifted his tone.

“Come to think of it, you agreed to dance the first dance with Gakane to help Yuder, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, right. Yes, that’s true.”

Currently, in the Cavalry, there were fewer Omega Awakeners than Alpha Awakeners. Even if everyone paired up, there would still be leftover Alpha Awakeners. Though these remaining Alpha Awakeners could choose a partner without considering their secondary gender, after much thought, Ever had chosen Gakane, another Alpha Awakener. Even though there seemed to be no visible difference to others due to their differing primary genders, her decision was made out of a desire to help Yuder in any small way she could.

“So, has anyone pestered you for the second dance?”

“The second dance?”

“Yes, someone like Lord Elle, for instance…”

“Why would Elle’s name suddenly come up in this context?”

Ever tilted her head, seemingly puzzled as to why the name of Pruelle Van Tain, who had recently become a temporary member of the Cavalry, would suddenly be mentioned.

“I decided to dance the second dance with Liv.”

“Liv? Liv Dwayne of Jung?”

“Yes. She’s an Omega Awakener and we share the same primary gender. She’s not my first dance partner, but I thought it would be fine for the second, so we agreed.”

“I see… And for the third?”

Ever furrowed her brow slightly.

“Steiber. I don’t know what you’re thinking, but Lord Elle is a good person. He’s not particularly interested in me; he’s just someone who

dreamed of joining the Cavalry after the trial of the Apeto family.”

Hearing Ever’s words, Steiber flinched and gave a wry smile.

“Haha. Right, sorry. But if you’d seen Gakane’s face when I said I’d dance with him, you’d understand why I’m so curious—”

“Everyone, are you all ready?”

Just then, Kishiar’s voice resonated from behind them, drawing the attention of all the members present. Steiber and Ever paused their conversation and turned their heads.

“Wow.”

Someone among the members standing next to Steiber quietly let out a sigh of admiration. Though silent, Steiber felt the same.

Whenever they saw Commander Kishiar La Orr, they were already bewitched by his appearance, forgetting even their accumulated years and experience. But today, he was, unquestionably, the most resplendent among all they had ever seen.

Kishiar had worn a magnificent traditional costume brimming with vibrant colors and jewels during the harvest festival. But today, he wore the complete opposite: a simple costume made from black cloth. It resembled the white costumes of the other members but had a far more profound gravity.

The sharp red fabric draped over his shoulders, arms, and waist made him look like a deity from an ancient painting. Seeing was believing; one couldn’t imagine that a single piece of cloth could carry such a majestic yet humble aura.

Apart from the golden embroidery on his outer garment, he had no other decorations, yet he appeared even more grand and overwhelming than before. A long earring in his ear and a single ring

on his hand were his only adornments, and even those were void of any jewels.

His golden locks and red pupils alone held more brilliance than any gemstone.

Caught up in the spectacle of the towering Commander, Steiber's focus was momentarily diverted until he noticed another person standing a step behind Kishiar. Dressed as differently as the Commander was, he was Yuder Aile, a proud member of the Cavalry and a spiritual pillar of sorts.

"Oh…"

Steiber had only heard that Yuder wore a matching outfit to accompany the Commander during his time in the western region, but he had never seen it. Yet, the outfit he saw now seemed neither less nor more impressive than what he had heard.

Like the Commander, Yuder had swept his black hair back. Though wearing a lighter coat embroidered differently from the harvest festival, one could instantly tell he was Kishiar's counterpart. This was mainly because the belt tying his coat was astonishingly made of the same red fabric that Kishiar wore.

Dressed in a white formal uniform with a vibrant red sash stylishly knotted around his waist, and wearing white gloves—emblazoned with the emblem of the Cavalry instead of his usual black ones—the Commander's assistant Yuder shone like a chilly dawn star, his usual pallor nowhere to be seen.

In a sense different from Kishiar, Yuder seemed as though it was only natural for him to stand at the forefront, representing everyone else present. A strange yet captivating aura filled the eyes of the young man, who was only in his twenties. It was as if he had spent his entire life looking down at others from above.

“Why has everyone suddenly gone quiet? I know I’m extraordinarily good-looking, but it’s a little embarrassing when even my men lose their composure like this.”

Only after Kishiar broke the silence with a playful smile and a jest did the members regain their sense of reality. Bursting into hearty laughter, they lightly tossed comments back and forth, agreeing that he was right, how they were surprised all over again, and bowed their heads before their leader.

“Well then, shall we go?”

“Yes!”

Kishiar and Yuder climbed into the carriage. As the long procession of carriages began to move toward the imperial palace, passing the grounds of the Imperial Knights and heading out into the streets of the Seventh Wall, people couldn’t help but express their awe.

“The Cavalry has arrived.”

The palace, which was to host today’s feast and party, was bustling with activity once the carriages arrived.

“Welcome, Your Highness.”

The hurriedly-arriving attendants greeted Kishiar and the Cavalry with proper ceremony. Following their guidance into the front yard, Kishiar flashed a smile at Yuder, who stood beside him.

“It seems these clothes are quite astonishing. There’s not a single person who isn’t startled.”

“Isn’t that precisely what you intended?”

“Of course, that’s true.”

Today, Kishiar had actually chosen to wear a black formal suit, re-tailored from ‘Da Fiel’. Originally a dress belonging to his late mother, the former Empress, it still added unparalleled grace to him even after two alterations.

‘I was curious why I was told not to discard the red lining… I never thought it would be used like this.’

Kishiar had removed the dark-red fabric that had been used as a lining and had it wrapped over his clothing. Though simple, the end result looked as if it had been made to be worn that way from the very beginning.

He didn’t stop there; he even took a portion of that fabric to make a new sash for Yuder’s suit. Until today, even Yuder had been unaware of this fact. The surprise he felt upon seeing and experiencing it was indescribable.

It was just an outer piece of fabric and a mere sash, after all.

Yet even without coordinating their formal attire, the two drew more attention than if they had matched perfectly.

Yuder maintained his usual composure as he observed the expressions of those who were astonished first by Kishiar’s formal outfit, and then doubly astonished by his own waistband. As he walked confidently toward the hall where the ceremony would be held, he never once lowered his tense jaw or relaxed his straight back.

“Please wait here for a moment before entering.”

A servant led them to a spacious waiting room and then disappeared. It was only then that the other participants, who had been tense, began to relax and chat, examining the surrounding sculptures and decorations.

Yuder did not touch any of the snacks or drinks prepared for light refreshment. Instead, he gazed at the closed door, slowly reviewing the sequence of events he was to follow during the ceremony.

‘After entering, receive the award in the pre-notified order, greet everyone, and return to my seat. Then the dance music will start,’ he thought.

“Yuder.”

As he was reciting the sequence of events for the umpteenth time and considering any variables or other noble participants that might be present, he heard a voice beside him. Turning his head, he saw Kishiar smiling, his eyebrows slightly furrowed.

“If you stand like that, people will mistake you for a sculpture. Whoever brought such a fine piece of art has excellent taste.”

“You’re particularly jocular today.”

“I’m always serious, you know.”

“…”

This was a ridiculous statement, and it had nothing to do with how tenderly Yuder was feeling toward Kishiar. Before he could maintain his silence for too long, Kishiar stepped closer and brushed back the strands of hair that had fallen onto his forehead.

“If you stand like this without realizing that your hair is disheveled, others might approach you and ask if they can do the same. So, be careful,” Kishiar cautioned.

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Yuder only then realized that his hair had become considerably disheveled. But the real concern wasn't about his hair; it was about something else.

'So, this is his roundabout way of telling me to be careful once inside.'

While Yuder was busy gathering his comrades to establish an intelligence division within the Cavalry, Kishiar had not been idle either. He had utilized all his resources—from the Cavalry and the Peletta Knight to an array of unknown contacts—to thoroughly investigate any suspicious activities related to the party.

As a result, they had discovered numerous dangerous magic tools and poisons both inside and outside the palace where the party was to be held. Even among the palace attendants and maids helping with preparations, a few who showed suspicious behavior were either reassigned or expelled from the palace. Unfortunately, they were unable to find concrete evidence to catch the real culprit.

Despite the strong suspicion as to who the perpetrator might be, the lack of evidence brought to mind the assassins that had appeared during the Harvest Festival.

'They probably know that we've thwarted their pre-planned schemes.'

However, if they were not going to act because their intentions had been discovered, then Kiolle da Diarca would not have issued a warning to Yuder in the first place. Aware of this fact, Kishiar had pre-emptively notified his subordinates about the potential hazards that might occur that day. He had even provided a set of rules to the

members, advising them to be extra cautious while preparing for the party.

Still, if Duke Diarca was planning to make another move against the Cavalry today, the most likely target would probably be Yuder Aile, the one who stood to gain the greatest reward.

‘If I’m the target as expected, I’ll be grateful, but if not, I have several contingency plans, so it doesn’t matter…’

Still, Yuder didn’t find the man’s indirect warning to be cautious unnecessary.

As he went over the details and reviewed potential variables, his head, which had been clouded by chilly thoughts, felt as if it was melting under warm sunlight.

“Yes, I’ll be careful.”

At Yuder’s obedient response, Kishiar smiled. He finally brushed Yuder’s hair a few more times, styling it to his satisfaction before stepping back. Satisfied with his work, he spoke.

“I regret that I won’t be the one to bestow an award upon you today.”

“…”

“But at least I’ve claimed you as my dance partner.”

“Duke Peletta, Cavalry members, please come this way. It’s time to make your entrance.”

Before Yuder could say anything, an attendant appeared, signaling that it was time to enter. The Cavalry members lined up behind Kishiar, their faces a mix of joy, excitement, fear, and

concern. Though the emotions displayed were different, the common thread was a palpable tension.

As the attendant approached to open the large door, Kishiar spoke softly.

“Cavalry.”

“Yes.”

“Regardless of how remarkable those inside may be, today they are all here to celebrate us.”

At his words, softened yet resonant, the tension in their faces slightly relaxed.

“Are they more frightening than the monsters of the West?”

“No.”

“Do you think we don’t deserve to receive awards?”

“No.”

“Then that’s the end of the discussion. Now, are you still nervous?”

“No!”

At their immediate, confident response, the corners of Kishiar’s lips curved upward. With an air of unparalleled self-confidence and dignity, he issued his final command to the members.

“Alright. Let’s go have some fun, shall we?”

At that moment, the doors swung open, flooding the area with light. The heralds announced in unison the solemn entrance of Commander Kishiar of the Cavalry and the Cavalry members who

followed him. Various musicians lifted their heads high and played a grand and majestic tune.

The Cavalry members followed Kishiar, walking on a path laid out with red fabric. The enormous and exquisite hall of the Cantameria Palace was adorned with vibrant banners bearing the emblem of the Cavalry. Those who had already entered the hall burst into applause, captivated by the grandiose entrance of the Cavalry.

Unsurprisingly, most eyes were fixed on Kishiar at the front—on his audacious formal attire and his face. While there were whispers amongst the crowd, he appeared undisturbed, harboring only a relaxed smile as he moved forward.

Finally, all 330 members of the Cavalry were inside, but the door remained open. Following them was a gigantic object covered in golden fabric, carried on a wheeled cart.

"…What is that?"

Noble voices filled with curiosity echoed in the hall. Yet, no one could guess what it was. A restrained chuckle flickered across the faces of some members, doing their best to maintain their composure, then quickly vanished.

Kishiar took his seat at the front, reserved for the Cavalry. The members also found their places and settled down. Naturally, Yuder's seat was right next to Kishiar.

The seats for the Cavalry were directly below three magnificent chairs at the front of the hall. These chairs were reserved for the Emperor, the Empress, and the Crown Prince—the heir to the throne.

Would Emperor Keilusa make an appearance today? Many exchanged glances as they looked at the Emperor's chair, which had always remained empty up until now.

Soon enough, a herald loudly announced the arrival of the royal family.

“In the name of Orr, may the eternal light that never dims from dawn to dusk bless us!”

Everyone promptly stood up, placed their hands over their chests, and bowed their heads. Amidst a sea of shifting eyes, Yuder noticed Duke Diarca tightly sealing his thin lips in apparent discomfort.

Moments later, the Emperor and Empress entered side by side. The Emperor looked somewhat thinner than at the welcoming ceremony but appeared no less dignified, thanks to the makeup on his face and the sparkling crown of jewels on his head. The Empress also looked flawless, dressed in perfectly coordinated attire and accessories, a stark contrast to their previous modest meeting.

Following them, Crown Prince Katchian also revealed himself. The young prince, who was nearing adulthood, didn’t look much different from the last Harvest Festival. His large, sharp eyes made him appear younger than he actually was. He looked perfectly healthy, making one wonder if his period of seclusion due to “illness” had been a ruse.

“Ah…”

A soft exclamation came from the vicinity of where Duke Diarca was seated. It was undoubtedly from the nobles accompanying Duke Diarca and Prince Katchian.

The royal family took their designated seats. Emperor Keilusa, seated on the highest and grandest chair, let out a deep sigh as he scanned over everyone gathered. His gaze finally rested on the Cavalry and Kishiar, seated at the bottom of the stairs.

The Emperor’s gaze subtly shifted when he saw Kishiar’s striking formal attire. However, it was only for a fleeting moment—a moment that only Yuder, with his keen eyes, could notice. The Emperor quickly composed himself, reverting to a neutral expression. Though this was their first meeting since their private meal that had not concluded particularly well, none of the brothers let their emotions show on their faces.

The Emperor spoke softly but loud enough for all to hear. “I’m grateful that so many have gathered here. On this day, I thank God that I can bestow blessings upon you all.”

What followed was the formal commencement of the ceremony. Representing the Cavalry, Kishiar stood up and elegantly took a knee before the Emperor. They exchanged a few polite niceties. The Emperor then commended the Duke of Peletta for skillfully leading the Cavalry and promised to provide new buildings and lands for the Cavalry, as well as abundant weapons to aid in their training.

Next, the first among the members to be called was, naturally, Yuder.

“Yuder Aile, come forth!”

As he rose from his seat in response to the summons, all eyes were fixed on him. Kishiar, who had returned to his seat, sent Yuder a fleeting smile. Yuder turned his head to avoid getting caught in that gaze and walked at a moderate pace until he reached the Emperor.

Upon taking a knee, just as Kishiar had done earlier, he could clearly sense the gazes of the Emperor, Empress, and Crown Prince settling above him.

“Yuder Aile has actively participated in the recent western monster subjugation mission as a member of the Cavalry and as the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. In particular, he risked injury to himself by boldly stepping forward alone to defeat a massive

monster, all in the effort to save others. His achievements will go down in history and serve as an inspiration to all.”

As the herald began reading Yuder’s accomplishments from a prepared paper, he felt a ripple of whispers behind him. The entire Empire had been buzzing about the young man who had slain the infamous giant monster, and everyone present was shocked to discover he was so young.

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Chapter 498

For the first time, Yuder Aile fully came into their view, appearing entirely different from the vague rumors that had been circulating about him. Though undoubtedly young, he did not give off the impression of immaturity and servility that nobles generally associated with common youth.

He stood with an enigmatic ease, as if he had attended such gatherings hundreds of times before. His posture was so dignified that he could easily be mistaken for a seasoned member of any knightly order. His pale face exuded a frighteningly staunch sense of self-worth.

Just like other nobles, his slick black hair and red waistband emphasized his broad shoulders and straight back, making him appear considerably unique.

‘I don’t know where he comes from, but he’s definitely not just any young man. The rumors about him single-handedly taking down a monster the size of a house don’t seem to be baseless exaggerations,’ even Duke Diarca momentarily harbored such thoughts. He clicked his tongue, realizing that had they not met under these circumstances, he would have certainly mistaken Yuder Aile as someone who had grown up in luxury.

An enigmatic commoner who commanded attention through an inexplicable aura. What was certain was that the rumors of Yuder Aile dining with Duke Peletta and engaging in debauchery suited him less than the terrifying accounts of him single-handedly tearing down a cliff to slay a monster.

Around that time, the herald finally finished recounting all of Yuder’s accomplishments from the west and respectfully bowed his

head. Emperor Keilusa spoke to the young man with black hair who was bowing before him.

“Sir Aile, you may raise your head.”

Yuder lifted his gaze and head at a measured pace. Too quick, and he’d be accused of a commoner’s lack of manners; too slow, and he’d risk being suspected of disregarding the Emperor’s command. Years of navigating such nuances had instilled in him a natural grace.

However, the gaze he met this time was entirely different. As he looked into the warm eyes of Emperor Keilusa and the Empress, he felt something unlike anything he’d experienced in his previous life.

“For your courage in selflessly dedicating yourself to the people of Orr, and returning safely to this place, you should receive an appropriate reward. Therefore, I will grant you a monetary reward, a mansion, and furthermore, a monument will be erected in the Great Sarain Forest to commemorate your deeds. The monument will detail the events of that day so that no one will ever face the same danger again.”

The announcement exceeded all expectations, causing a ripple of astonishment throughout the hall. Though many monuments were scattered throughout Orr to honor great Swordmasters and Archmages, the young man before them was neither.

‘Isn’t this too much of a reward just to strengthen the Cavalry?’ Duke Diarca and other nobles exchanged glances as they began to silently share their thoughts. At that moment, Emperor Keilusa spoke again.

“Additionally, in the hopes that Sir Aile will continue to serve as a strong pillar for the Empire, I intend to bestow upon him the title of Single Victory Baron.”

“…”

The title of Baron, even if it’s the Single Victory title which can’t be passed down to offspring, was an enormous deal. At least for decades, no one had received such a title. Several attendees wore expressions of near-fainting shock. Gasps of disbelief and astonishment rose from various corners, but the Emperor’s expression remained unchanging.

And it seemed the same was true for Yuder, though in truth, he was quite astonished.

‘Even the monument alone was beyond my expectations… and now, you add a formal title to that?’

Was that what was implied when Yuder had dinner with the Emperor?

‘This is too much, even if there’s an intention behind it.’

Yuder initially bowed his head, signaling his refusal.

“I’m grateful for the honor, Your Majesty. However, I am not the person fit for such a position. The deeds attributed to me were not solely my own. I am simply an ordinary man content with helping the Empire and its people. I have already received too much for what I have done; please retract your offer.”

“That’s precisely why I wish to honor you,” Emperor Keilusa responded, as though he had anticipated the answer.

“How can I entrust the responsibilities to someone who doesn’t understand their weight?”

“…But.”

“Let me indulge in the joy of choosing the right person. No more refusals.”

It was an irrevocable rejection. The Empress, having read Yuder’s expression, wore a slight smile as if agreeing with the Emperor’s decision. It was the exact opposite of what Yuder had hoped for.

‘Then, the only one who could possibly object now is…’

Yuder shifted his gaze again, briefly locking eyes with Crown Prince Katchian, who sat opposite the Empress. The Crown Prince looked as if he was either contemplating something or simply finding Yuder to be a curious spectacle. It was an eerie and unsettling stare.

‘It seems no one is planning to object now.’

In the end, Yuder managed to refuse just the cash prize and the mansion, ultimately accepting the title the Emperor had bestowed upon him. The moment seemed to have been anticipated, as the imperial hall of the Orr Empire was prepared for the conferring ceremony. He became Baron Aile.

When he turned to acknowledge the crowd, the Cavalry members cheered loudly, their faces flushed. Yuder glanced at them with mixed emotions before averting his eyes. Kishiar, who was clapping, met his eyes and grinned as if he had been waiting for just that moment.

‘Did you know this would happen and yet say nothing?’

‘…’

He asked with his eyes, but all that returned was a smile. It was unclear whether the answer was yes or no.

He had suspected he might receive the largest reward among the members, but this was beyond excessive. Yuder sighed softly before kneeling once more before the Emperor, finally saying the words that should have been said much earlier.

“Thank you. While there may be no way to fully repay Your Majesty’s endless grace and trust, please allow me to dedicate the head of the monster—brought by the collective will of the entire Cavalry—to the Sun Palace.”

“The monster’s head, you say? The one that Baron Aile risked his life to capture?”

Although the Emperor seemed to already know, he asked as if hearing it for the first time.

“Yes, it is the evidence of that day, preserved all the way from the Great Sarain Forest.”

“Interesting. Let’s verify it right here.”

My God. As all the nobles began to murmur, four of the members brought a cart covered with a golden cloth toward Yuder. The moment everyone had been curious about had arrived.

“Those of you who are faint of heart, please close your eyes.”

Yuder briefly warned before lifting the cloth. The moment the giant head of Pethuamet was revealed, those who had not heeded the warning screamed or averted their eyes, holding their breath.

“My heavens, how can such a thing be…!”

Despite having been dead for some time, the head of Petuameth looked as vivid as if it had been alive just moments ago. The glinting eyes beneath half-closed eyelids were as large as those of a healthy man, and between the sharp teeth, the traces of a severed tongue

were visible. It was the tongue that Yuder had cut off at the last moment.

Underneath a grand chandelier, the numerous massive wounds and torn flesh that hinted at a ferocious battle glowed eerily yet gruesomely beautiful.

Even the Empress turned away slightly, her face ashen as she gripped the armrest of her chair. The Emperor, however, swept his gaze over everything, neither turning away nor showing any signs of disgust.

“Seeing it firsthand is even more shocking. I’ve heard that the creature grew larger as time passed. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask what you were thinking when you faced that thing alone?”

Yuder paused, pondering how to respond.

Did the Emperor want a carefully crafted answer, or raw honesty?

In the end, Yuder concluded that there wasn’t much difference between the two.

What he had been thinking at that time was…

“I felt relieved and satisfied.”

“Relieved? About what?”

“Because I was able to put an end to it there and then.”

If he hadn’t been able to end it at that place, at that time, it was clear what would have happened. The entire West would have been destroyed, and many would have died. He was satisfied that the

blood of the Cavalry members and Kishiar La Orr didn't once again flood the forests of the West. That was all.

Upon hearing the answer, a faint smile appeared on the lips of the Emperor.

"The courage of the Baron Aile is truly commendable. Are you really not going to accept the mansion and the monetary reward?"

"Yes, please do withdraw that offer."

He didn't need any more money than his current salary, and the Cavalry barracks was his home. What would he do with another house? It would only make commuting inconvenient.

"Then what should be done with the prepared mansion and reward?"

"…"

"Duke Peletta."

"Yes."

Kishiar's smug response made Yuder almost inadvertently turn his head.

"The reward and mansion intended for the Baron Aile will be bestowed upon the Cavalry. Duke Peletta, you will be responsible for ensuring that they are appropriately used."

"Leave it to me. I will use them wisely to bring joy to Your Majesty."

Frustrated as he was, there was nothing Yuder could do about it.

"Then, after today, send the monster's head to the court mages for permanent preservation and store it in the First Palace of the Sun

Palace.”

“Yes.”

“Next, who will be rewarded?”

The answer of Deputy Commander of Shin Division Ever Beck resounded.

Yuder’s part was over. He rose from his seat and watched as Ever approached him. The moment their shoulders brushed, Ever gave a quick smile and gently tapped Yuder’s arm before confidently walking away.

Returning to his seat, Yuder received beaming glances from his comrades. Their eyes seemed to scream they wanted to speak with him, yet because they had to maintain composure, their twisting bodies looked almost pitiable.

“…”

Yuder quietly turned his gaze to the large man sitting beside him. Kishiar rolled his eyes and let out a delightfully joyful laugh. His expression indicated he was enjoying the situation immensely.

‘…Phew.’

Well, if that’s how it is, then it didn’t matter.

Yuder sat quietly, watching as the names of the members were called one by one. Different from his own announcement, most accolades were not elaborately detailed; the rewards were concise. The majority of the Cavalry members received cash prizes and valuable jewels, along with the honor of a “Surname.” Those who had already achieved more, or who already had a Surname, were awarded a magic stone brooch for their honorable deeds. By the

standards of the Empire, this award was equivalent to the Platinum Medal.

After all the awards were distributed, the Emperor commanded that the head of Pethuamet be placed in the most visible part of the hall for everyone to see. The expressions of the nobles, who looked like they might faint, were quite something to behold.

And then, finally, the time for dancing arrived.

“Tonight’s opening piece, and the time that follows, has been given freely for the Cavalry members and Duke Peletta to enjoy. I shall remain here. I will be taking a brief rest with the Empress in Conde’s room, so everyone, please have a pleasant time,” announced the Emperor. He seemingly used the Cavalry as an excuse to retire with the Empress. Perhaps it was due to his health that he couldn’t move, but to the public eye, it was a somewhat reasonable explanation.

“Well, let’s get started then,” Kishiar stood from his seat, offering his hand to Yuder amidst the bustling crowd. His lips, tinged red, curved into a smile as he extended an invitation that Yuder had never heard in his past life, and did so with a playful and buoyant face.

“Would you do me the honor of dancing with you?”

The spectacle of the nobles, who couldn’t believe what they were seeing as Duke Peletta respectfully bowed and extended his hand in front of Yuder, barely came into his peripheral vision. Just as he had expected.

Yuder quietly looked down at the hand offered to him and then placed his own hand on top of it.

“Yes.”

Their hands clenched tightly, one around the other.

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Chapter 499

Commander of the Cavalry, Duke Peletta, confidently stepped into the center of the hall with his first dance partner of the evening. But the person holding his hand was not a lady in a gown; it was a man, tall and broad-shouldered, with an unmistakable air of solidity.

The mere act of two men dancing was unprecedented, and to make matters more astonishing, his partner was none other than the Cavalry member who had received the highest honor from the Emperor earlier that day.

“What an outrageous act!”

“I thought the rumors were just that, but he’s really going to dance with that man?”

Even if Duke Peletta was of imperial descent, this crossed a line. Most of the nobles were appalled, viewing the act as a violation of tradition and an insult to their own stature. The astonishment was mutual among the nobles clinging to the Crown Prince and those surrounding Duke Diarca.

“My word, is such a thing even permissible in the imperial palace of Great Orr?”

“Shouldn’t we stop them right away?”

“It’s already too late for that. Did you not hear about the sudden rule change while this party was being prepared?”

Duke Diarca asked with an icy expression. Those who had paid little attention to minor rule changes looked puzzled or lifted their eyebrows as if recalling something.

“Could it be…”

“Is the odd rule change about not limiting the attendees by gender intended for this?”

“Good heavens, then that commoner who was given the title of baron, the one we heard about in the Apeto family’s trial, is neither man nor woman?”

“So that’s why Duke Peletta took that man to his bed…”

The shock compounded, each revelation tailing the last. People knew Duke Peletta had become an Awakener and manifested a second gender, but until now, they had never taken it seriously because it did not change his appearance.

For the first time, they realized that Duke Peletta’s actions might not be mere debauchery. It was a confusing realization.

The atmosphere grew chaotic, divided between those who claimed that such behavior could never be tolerated and those speculating about dual genders based on what they heard during the Apeto family’s trial. Meanwhile, the other Cavalry members took their partners and stood beside their Commander. At first glance, the sheer number of them made them appear ordinary, but on closer inspection, they were far from it. Men danced with men, and women with women—the sight was shocking in itself.

Duke Diarca burst into sudden, derisive laughter amidst the stunned nobles.

“I’ve heard rumors about the admirable feats of the Emperor’s cherished Cavalry and had high expectations. But what they’re doing now seems no different from child’s play. I have no intention of joining them in their dance, so I’ll remain seated.”

The hidden meaning behind Duke Diarca's words was clear. The shocking behavior of the Cavalry and its aftermath were a reflection of the Emperor's influence. Rather than giving it meaning by reacting, he intended to dismiss it as something 'absurd' without even the need for debate.

Following Duke Diarca's declaration not to dance, the nobles around him promptly returned to their seats as well. The buzzing that had filled the area around Crown Prince Katchian ceased, and the eyes that were once focused on the Cavalry were deliberately withdrawn.

However, not everyone was the same, of course. A prime example was Pruelle Van Tain, who had attended under someone else's name since he was not yet an official member of the Cavalry, and his younger sister Priscilla Van Tain, who had recently become the new heir to the Tain ducal family.

Too busy to even attend their father's trial, they had quietly entered the gathering today and kept to themselves, avoiding interactions with other nobles. But when most of the nobility began to decline offers to dance, they were the first to step forward and join the ranks of the cavalry.

"Priscilla, it's been a long time since we danced together," Pruelle said.

"Yes, and it's the first time at an event like this," Priscilla replied.

A young woman with auburn hair resembling Pruelle's and deep green eyes like aged copper took his hand and assumed her stance. However, the siblings' gaze was directed not at each other but at a particular spot.

"Is that the girl? The one who our First Prince has been chasing around at every trial and eventually caused him to flee to the west alone with Nipollen?"

Priscilla asked, side-eyeing Ever.

Her gaze fell on Ever, who was preparing to dance with Gakane and engaged in conversation.

“Yes,” Pruelle confirmed.

“She looked quite impressive earlier. Seems highly capable too.”

“I thought so as well.”

“Well, you should have at least succeeded in asking her to dance. Do you know how much trouble I had getting ready to come here, with so much work piling up?”

“Haha, I’m really sorry,” Pruelle apologized.

“Don’t say you should have stayed home then. That’s not what I mean,” she added, seeing Pruelle’s awkward smile. She softened her pretend-angry expression. Pruelle had seriously considered not attending today’s party, given that she had just become the heir to the Tain house. Knowing this, Priscilla had insisted they come, dismissing what anyone might say about the Tain family.

Priscilla was thankful yet pained that Pruelle, who had given up everything to join the Cavalry for the sake of his siblings, still couldn’t freely ask someone to dance because of family concerns.

“By the way, the person she’s with looks really nice. What’s the relationship between those two?”

“Ah, you mean Sir Gakane Bolunwald? They are just fellow members of the same Shin Division as far as I know. He’s definitely handsome.”

Though both had a similar shade of auburn hair, Gakane and Pruelle looked completely different. Even if not as breathtakingly

handsome as Duke Peletta, who could command the attention of the entire ballroom, he was nonetheless unforgettable. The appearance of such a virtuous and handsome young man had certainly turned more than a few heads at the party.

“Don’t think you’re lacking compared to him. You’re absolutely not,” Priscilla stated firmly.

Pruelle could only smile at his sister’s words. He felt grateful but also a little embarrassed that she thought so highly of him.

‘It’s thanks to everything going well in Tainu that I can feel this way. That’s enough for now.’

The sight of the siblings whispering intimately attracted a fair amount of attention. Riding on this momentum, the next to step forward were Revlin Shand Apeto of House Apeto, also a temporary Cavalry member like Pruelle, and his lover, Dandenion.

Revlin had been only a temporary member, so he spent the entire western mission in the capital. He had only watched the welcoming ceremony from a distance. However, upon hearing about the new party rules set by the Cavalry, he quickly arranged a new formal attire faster than anyone else. Boys in matching outfits, unmistakably a set, joined the ranks of the Cavalry without hesitation.

Once one became two, it was quick for two to become three. The hall’s atmosphere changed back to a pleasant one as a small number of nobles following the Emperor quietly filled the remaining seats.

And finally, dozens of instruments that had been meticulously prepared for today began to be played in unison. The nobles, who had been pretending not to notice, turned their heads in disbelief at the startlingly different opening from the solemn and slow pieces usually performed in the palace.

“This isn’t the Rancha, is it?”

“How disgraceful, men dancing with men, and now the Avitan in the palace!”

Some looked offended, as if insulted; others shook their heads in disbelief, wearing expressions of despair; while yet others seemed lost, awkwardly glancing around at their neighbors. The hall was in utter disarray.

Be that as it may, the gathered crowd began to dance. At the center stood Duke Peletta, who turned a full circle as he guided the movements of the young man with black hair by touching his back. At that moment, the violin melody soared passionately, as if intent on drowning out the voices of those who had been gossiping.

The moment eyes turned toward them, the red fabric sleeve covering Kishiar’s arm elegantly fluttered, cutting through the air. The movements were effortlessly graceful, sensually captivating, without a hint of unnecessary flourish.

As he took a bold step toward his partner’s leg without showing any restraint, his partner Yuder Aile moved in time to the beat as well. It was a daring move, almost unimaginable for a man of common birth to be dancing with someone whom he should not even dare to touch.

While his dance skills were admittedly more rigid compared to the already renowned Duke Peletta, his movements, oddly proficient yet restrained, harmonized unusually well with Kishiar.

With Kishiar’s excellent lead, the dance the two brought forth looked like a sword dance, as if they had long been attuned to each other, wielding two swords in harmony.

One thing was certain: it was similar yet different from any Avitan they had ever seen before.

Those who had been loudly decrying the dance as shameful, a dance fit only for commoners, graceless and inelegant, one by one fell silent. They felt that no words were of use before those who danced so boldly, as if they heard nothing else, refusing to avert their gaze from each other.

Among those present was Kiolle, who was stationed near the chair where Crown Prince Katchian sat.

‘He’s insane. Completely insane!’

Kiolle had come as a knight escorting Crown Prince Katchian, so he wasn’t officially a party attendee. The party he observed from a safe distance was, in his eyes, a scene of madness filled with impossibilities.

‘A man who’s merely been granted a baronial title is dancing with Duke Peletta? And they’re dancing the Avitan? Is he courting death?’

But no matter how much he rubbed his eyes, the reality remained unchanged. The sight of Yuder Aile dancing with a blank expression, snugly wrapped in Duke Peletta’s arm, looked like the embodiment of shock and astonishment.

As Kiolle nervously watched the spectacle, his eyes caught sight of his father in the background, quietly conversing with other nobles.

His father didn’t look perplexed like the other nobles. Instead, he twisted his thin lips upward in an aristocratic sneer, leisurely swirling the wine glass in his hand.

“…”

He may not have known, but that audacious black-haired Cavalry member had certainly left a mark on his father, and not in a good way. Kiolle was sure of it.

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Chapter 500

Duke Diarca, Kiolle's father, was a nobleman to his very core. It was easy to imagine how Yuder Aile, who brazenly broke all established rules while standing at the center of this chaotic scene, would appear in his eyes.

Duke Diarca was generous to capable subordinates who knew their place, but he was not merciful enough to extend that courtesy to those who opposed him.

Ordinarily, whether the audacious man engaging in shameless acts with Duke Peletta lived or died by his father's hand would have nothing to do with Kiolle. He might have even applauded from the sidelines.

But for Kiolle at this moment… he was bound like a chain by an oath.

'Surely he's not causing all this trouble just to later ask for my help? If the exchange of information was just bait, and he lured me here today for that…!'

Even if he had witnessed a scene so revolting, shocking, and baffling, Kiolle was also in danger if he sensed Yuder's peril and didn't assist. It was madness.

Suddenly, a low voice reached Kiolle's ears, as he was trembling with clenched fists.

"Was his name Yuder Aile?"

For a moment, Kiolle thought his thoughts had been read and lifted his head. The one who had spoken was Crown Prince

Katchian, who sat alone on a high chair at the top of the stairs. The nobles who had surrounded him had, at some point, dispersed.

Calming his racing heart, Kiolle managed to find his composure and opened his mouth.

“I apologize. I didn’t hear you properly. What did you say?”

“That man over there, dancing with Duke Peletta. His name is Yuder Aile, is it not?”

Though it could have been a rhetorical question, a reply came back. However, the Crown Prince’s eyes were not focused on Kiolle but were fixed at the center of the dancing crowd.

“Yes, I’ve heard as much.”

Adding ‘I’ve heard as much’ was Kiolle’s desperate attempt to avoid any possible association with Yuder Aile. Naturally, the Crown Prince paid no attention to this petty resistance and continued speaking.

“I have seen that man before.”

“Pardon?”

“It was during the Harvest Festival. I had personally asked the Duke to investigate him for displaying remarkable abilities, but heard nothing significant. I had forgotten about him until now, but seeing him today brings it all back. At first, I thought he looked different, but yes… it is undoubtedly him. Definitely…”

That the Crown Prince had seen Yuder Aile before and had even shown interest was news to Kiolle. But what did it matter now? Kiolle couldn’t fathom why the usually indifferent Crown Prince was bringing this up and felt exceedingly uneasy.

Finally, Katchian turned his head toward Kiolle, who had been shifting his eyes nervously without either calling out to the Crown Prince or responding.

“Do you know anything about that man?”

“You mean, about him?”

Unknowingly, Kiolle’s voice came out edged. While he feared he had displayed his discomfort too obviously, to Kiolle’s relief, his tone seemed only to imply a noble’s incredulity at the suggestion of knowing a commoner.

Crown Prince Katchian curled his lips in a faint smile and added further explanation.

“The Imperial Knights and the Cavalry share the same grounds, don’t they? I seem to remember hearing that you were rather furious for a while about being insulted by a commoner from the Cavalry when you were in the Imperial Knights… Given that man’s abilities, you may have heard some rumors as you came and went.”

And so, the web of intrigue thickened.

Kiolle clenched his teeth, recalling the time when he first encountered Yuder Aile and how he had been humiliated. That’s right, there was that incident. If he had banished him back then, he wouldn’t be in this uncomfortable situation now. A long-suppressed anger surged anew.

‘To say I don’t know him at all would look suspicious… Damn it! Why do I have to consider all this while answering?’

“Well, as you mentioned, I’ve heard some rumors in passing. They say the assistant of the Cavalry Commander is quite… capable. I wouldn’t know for sure, I have no interest in the matter of commoner.”

The words scarcely left his lips, as he found it difficult to praise Yuder Aile in this situation. Nonetheless, Crown Prince Katchian seemed to be satisfied with the explanation and nodded his head.

“Indeed, a capable assistant. It means he wasn’t selected just to be discarded.”

“…”

“I heard earlier that Duke Diarca’s side was planning to send a gift to the Cavalry to celebrate today’s event. Were you aware?”

The subject changed abruptly. Kiolle furrowed his brows and responded with a questioning, “Excuse me?”

“Didn’t you know? A gift fitting for one who excels in slaying monsters.”

A cold, subdued laughter flickered in the Crown Prince’s eyes, reminiscent of a cat. Just then, a mix of emotions swelled in the hall, filling the air with applause and exclamations. Kiolle turned to see that the first dance had ended. Through the crowd, he glimpsed the back of Yuder Aile, swathed in Duke Peletta’s red fabric as he completed the final move of the dance.

As Duke Peletta whispered something into Yuder Aile’s ear and chuckled, a faint smile appeared on Yuder’s face. Kiolle felt a slight shock at this entirely different expression. Then he was struck by the realization that he was shocked in the first place.

Because of this, he missed the last mumbled words from the Crown Prince, who was also quietly watching the scene.

“I wonder how he will receive that gift. Whether the old duke’s intuition will prove correct, or if it will be like that time…”

So close to saying, ‘or he’ll smash it to pieces.’

The first dance required the participation of everyone in the Cavalry. But starting from the second dance, only those who wished to participate could come forth. Yuder decided not to join the second dance and withdrew to the center of the hall. The nobles around him backed away as if they had seen a monster, a sight that amused him.

‘Being treated like a lowly, slightly dangerous insect, as in my previous life, is far worse than this.’

The controversy between the First and Second Genders would undoubtedly flare up due to today’s events. Everyone would soon know exactly what the Second Gender was. Simultaneously, it would become public knowledge that Kishiar and Yuder were not merely using each other for amusement or reputation in the West.

Dancing at a party was never a solo endeavor.

The fact that they had practiced a dance never before performed in a formal setting was the best proof that both harbored the same purpose and shared the same intentions.

Even if rumors related to homosexuality followed, they wouldn’t follow the same trajectory as in his previous life. Revealing Yuder Aile as not merely an ordinary Awakener but an Omega presented the perfect opportunity to shift perceptions about the Second Gender. That he was accompanied by Kishiar, who was both of imperial blood and an Alpha, was nothing short of appropriate.

From the beginning, Yuder never thought that everything would get better. However, now that a single dance had given him a ‘fresh start’ entirely different from his previous life, he was certain he would encounter a future unlike any before.

With that, Yuder’s purpose for this dance had been completely fulfilled.

“One of the most splendid moments in life has just passed,” Kishiar softly whispered, standing beside Yuder.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

Gently responding, Kishiar smoothed out the sash around Yuder’s formal attire. A nearby man in noble garb backed away a little, choking back a strangled sound.

Just then, a servant, who seemed to have been waiting for the opportunity, approached Kishiar with an incredibly enigmatic expression and bowed.

“Your Grace, Duke Peletta, my apologies… His Majesty the Emperor wishes to speak with you. It’s a very urgent matter, so you must go immediately.”

“I see. Understood. I’ll go now.”

With a face that seemed to say he knew why he was being summoned, Kishiar obediently responded. He turned his head and gave Yuder a smile.

“Hmm… so far, everything has gone as expected. I’ll go and appease His Majesties for a bit; you can handle the rest.”

“Leave it to me.”

“Good.”

Kishiar, who seemed like he was about to say more, nodded and turned away. Yuder sensed that the unspoken words were a caution to ‘be careful.’

As soon as Kishiar disappeared, countless gazes converged on Yuder, who was now left alone. The glares were so intense they felt like they would tear him apart and leave not a trace behind if looks could have teeth and claws.

“Sir Yuder Aile. Or should I now call you Baron? Do you know who I am?”

Among them, a man with a seemingly painted smile and an imposing demeanor approached Yuder. Yuder glanced briefly at Duke Diarca sitting behind the man before shaking his head.

“No.”

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